

The Book of Colossians, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 9: Seek the Things Above

Colossians 3:1-11

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This passage marks the great turn of the letter from doctrine to practice, and the teacher must help students see that the turn is not a turn away from the gospel but an application of it. Paul grounds every command in an accomplished reality: you have been raised with Christ, you have died, your life is hidden with Christ in God. The doctrinal task is to establish the gospel pattern of indicative and imperative, that Christian living flows from what God has already done in our union with the risen Christ, not from self-generated effort. A related doctrinal point lies in verse 1: Christ is seated at the right hand of God, reigning now, which reinforces the present reign of Christ taught earlier in the letter (against any notion that His kingship is merely future). And verses 9 through 11 teach sanctification as the renewal of God's image in us and the creation of a new humanity in which worldly divisions lose their ultimacy because Christ is all and in all.

Pastorally, this passage is intensely practical, and the teacher should not soften its bluntness. Paul names sins plainly, the sins of the body (sexual immorality, impurity, covetousness) and the sins of temper and tongue (anger, malice, slander, filthy talk, lying), and commands believers to put them to death and put them away. The lesson should help students see that holiness is neither legalistic rule-keeping (Lesson 8 dismantled that) nor passive waiting, but the active putting off of the old and putting on of the new, empowered by union with Christ and fueled by a mind set on things above.

The formational aim is transformation in two directions: upward and outward. Upward, into a life increasingly oriented toward the reigning Christ, with the mind set above and the heart finding its life in Him. Outward, into a renewed character that lays down the sins that wound the body and into a unity that refuses the world's divisions. Aim the lesson there. Send students home lifting their eyes to Christ, honestly naming and killing specific sins, and embracing one another across every line the world draws.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul writes, if then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God (v. 1). What does it tell us that Paul roots our pursuit of heavenly things in something already accomplished (we have been raised), and what does it mean that Christ is right now seated and reigning at the right hand of God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul opens chapter 3 with the gospel logic that governs the whole section: if then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above. The command (seek the things above) rests on an accomplished fact (you have been raised). This is the consistent New Testament pattern: God acts, and our obedience flows from what He has done. We do not climb up to Christ by our seeking; we have already been raised with Him, and so we now orient our lives upward.

Help students see how freeing this order is. We are not striving to earn a position we do not yet have; we are living out a position already given. The Christian life is becoming, in practice, what we already are in Christ.

Then dwell on where Christ is: seated at the right hand of God. The seat is the seat of authority; the right hand is the place of supreme honor and rule. This reinforces what the letter has taught from the start: Christ is not a king-in-waiting but the reigning Lord, enthroned now (compare 1:13; 2:10). Our seeking is directed toward the place where our King already reigns.

Apply it: to seek the things above is to orient our desires, priorities, and pursuits around the reigning Christ and His kingdom, rather than around the passing concerns of earth. The direction of the Christian life is upward, toward the throne where Christ already sits.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The gospel pattern: command (seek above) grounded in accomplished fact (raised with Christ)
- Becoming in practice what we already are in Christ
- Christ seated at the right hand of God as the reigning Lord, not a king merely waiting (1:13; 2:10)
- Seeking the things above as orienting life around the reigning Christ and His kingdom

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Paul base the command to seek things above on something already accomplished?
- What does it mean that Christ is seated and reigning at God's right hand right now?
- What does it look like to seek the things above in ordinary life?

Question 2

Student Question:

Paul commands us to set our minds on things above. Be honest about where your mind naturally drifts in idle moments. What earthly thing most often captures your thoughts, and what is one concrete way you could begin redirecting your attention upward this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self question takes set your minds on things above into the realm of our actual thought life. Paul knows that we become what we dwell on; the direction of our attention shapes the direction of our lives. Yet most of us let our minds drift wherever the strongest pull takes them.

Invite honest observation. Where does the mind go in idle moments, while driving, lying awake, scrolling? For many it is worry, grievance, ambition, appetite, or comparison. These earthly fixations are not neutral; they slowly form the heart downward.

Then make redirection concrete. Setting the mind on things above is a practice, not a mood. It can mean filling the mind with Scripture, returning to a remembered truth when worry intrudes, beginning the day by lifting the eyes to Christ, choosing inputs that point upward rather than down. Encourage one specific, doable practice this week to begin retraining where the mind goes.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Becoming what we dwell on: attention shapes the heart
- Honest observation of where the mind drifts in idle moments
- Setting the mind above as a deliberate practice, not a mood
- One concrete practice to retrain the direction of our thoughts

Discussion Prompts

- Where does your mind naturally drift when it is idle?
- How do those fixations slowly shape your heart?
- What is one concrete way to set your mind on things above this week?

Question 3

Student Question:

Paul says you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God, and that when Christ who is your life appears, you also will appear with Him in glory (vv. 3–4). What does it mean that our true life is now hidden with Christ, and how does the promise of appearing with Him in glory reshape the way we view our present life?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verses 3 and 4 contain a stunning statement of Christian identity: you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. Two things stand out. First, you have died, the old life is over, decisively ended in our union with Christ's death. Second, your true life is now hidden with Christ in God, safe, secure, and not yet fully visible.

Help students grasp the comfort of hiddenness. Our real life, our truest self and security, is not on display and not at the mercy of circumstances; it is tucked away with Christ in God, beyond

the reach of anything that could destroy it. This gives a deep stability: what matters most about us is safe.

Then note the future unveiling: when Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory. The hidden life will one day be revealed in glory at Christ's coming. Our best self is not in the past but in the future, and it is bound up with Christ's own appearing.

Underline the phrase Christ who is your life. For the Christian, Christ is not one compartment of life among many; He is life itself, the very center and source of our existence. This sets up the searching self question that follows.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- You have died: the decisive end of the old life in union with Christ
- Our true life hidden with Christ in God, secure beyond circumstances
- Future glory at Christ's appearing as the unveiling of the hidden life
- Christ as our life itself, not merely one compartment among many

Discussion Prompts

- What comfort is there in knowing your true life is hidden with Christ in God?
- How does the promise of appearing with Christ in glory change your view of the present?
- What does it mean that Christ is your life, not just part of it?

Question 4

Student Question:

Paul says Christ is your life. Where have you been looking for your sense of life and identity, in your work, your family, your reputation, your accomplishments? What would it mean to let those good things be gifts rather than your life, and to find your life in Christ alone?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self question presses on the phrase Christ is your life by asking what we actually treat as our life. We all have something we functionally cannot imagine living without, the thing whose loss would feel like the end of us. That thing reveals where our life is really located.

Help students name it honestly: a career, a relationship, a child, a reputation, a level of health or comfort, an achievement. These are often good gifts. The problem is not loving them but making them our life, so that our entire sense of meaning and security rests on them.

Then offer the better way. When Christ is our life, good gifts can be received as gifts and even lost without destroying us, because our life is hidden in Him, not in them. This is not coldness toward the gifts but freedom in relation to them. Encourage students to name the thing they treat as their life and to begin, deliberately, to relocate their identity in Christ.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Identifying what we functionally treat as our life
- Good gifts becoming idols when they become our life and security
- Christ as our life freeing us to hold gifts without being destroyed by their loss
- Deliberately relocating identity and security in Christ

Discussion Prompts

- What do you treat as your life, the thing you cannot imagine losing?
- How is loving a gift different from making it your life?
- What would change if your truest identity were hidden in Christ?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul commands, put to death therefore what is earthly in you, and lists sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which he calls idolatry (v. 5). Why does Paul use the violent language of putting to death rather than merely managing these sins, and why does he identify covetousness, the craving for more, as a form of idolatry?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

In verse 5 Paul turns to the practical work of holiness with startling force: put to death therefore what is earthly in you. He lists the sins of the body and the appetites: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. The violent verb matters. These sins are not to be managed, domesticated, or negotiated with; they are to be killed.

Help students understand why mortification, not management, is the right approach. Sin treated gently grows; sin merely managed bides its time. The believer is called to a ruthless, ongoing war against these earthly impulses, taking decisive action against them rather than maintaining an uneasy truce.

Draw out Paul's striking label: covetousness is idolatry. The craving for more, more money, more possessions, more pleasure, is not a minor vice; it is idol worship, because it sets the heart's desire and trust on things rather than God. Greed feels respectable in a way the other sins on the list do not, and that is precisely its danger.

Note also the sobering motive Paul adds: on account of these the wrath of God is coming. Help students take seriously that sin is not trivial to God; His holy judgment against it is real. This is not meant to terrify the faithful but to sober the careless and to underscore why these things must be put to death and not coddled.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Mortification (putting to death) rather than management of sin
- The ongoing, decisive war against earthly impulses
- Covetousness as idolatry: desire and trust set on things rather than God
- The reality of God's wrath against sin as a sober motive (3:6)

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Paul say put to death rather than merely control these sins?
- Why is covetousness rightly called idolatry?
- How does the reality of God's wrath sharpen our seriousness about sin?

Question 6

Student Question:

Paul calls us to put to death specific sins, not just sin in general. Which one earthly thing on Paul's list (or beneath it) is God pressing you to put to death right now? What does putting it to death, rather than negotiating with it, actually require of you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self question makes mortification personal and specific. Paul lists particular sins, not sin in the abstract, and the believer makes progress by naming and killing specific sins rather than vaguely resolving to do better.

Help students identify the one earthly thing God is pressing on now. It may be on Paul's list directly, or it may be the desire underneath it, the lust, the greed, the craving that keeps reasserting itself. The goal is honesty about one real thing, not a comfortable generality.

Then talk about what putting it to death actually requires, as opposed to negotiating with it. Mortification often means cutting off access, confessing to someone, removing the occasions that feed the sin, and replacing it with the pursuit of Christ. Negotiation looks like setting limits we intend to keep crossing. Encourage one decisive, concrete action this week, taken in dependence on the risen Christ, against one specific sin.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Naming and killing specific sins rather than resolving vaguely
- Identifying the desire beneath the behavior
- Putting to death versus negotiating with sin
- A decisive, concrete action this week in dependence on Christ

Discussion Prompts

- Which one earthly thing is God pressing you to put to death right now?
- What does killing it, rather than negotiating with it, require of you?

- What decisive step could you take this week against that sin?

Question 7

Student Question:

Paul moves to a second list, sins of disposition and speech: anger, wrath, malice, slander, obscene talk, and lying to one another (vv. 8–9). Why does Paul give such weight to sins of temper and tongue, which we often excuse as minor, and what do these sins do to the body of Christ?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

In verses 8 and 9 Paul turns to a second cluster of sins, the sins of disposition and speech: anger, wrath, malice, slander, obscene talk, and lying to one another. These are sins we tend to excuse as minor, especially compared with the bodily sins of verse 5, yet Paul gives them serious weight and commands that they be put away entirely.

Help students see why these sins matter so much. They are relational; they wound the body of Christ directly. Sexual sin and greed damage the sinner and often a few others; anger, slander, and lying poison the fellowship, fracture relationships, and tear at the unity Paul will celebrate in verse 11. A congregation is rarely destroyed by scandalous sins; it is more often eroded by tempers, gossip, and small dishonesties.

Note that Paul includes the mouth prominently: slander, obscene talk, lying. Our words are powerful, and the tongue reveals the heart. The new self speaks differently.

Stress that putting these away is part of the same gospel-rooted work as mortifying the bodily sins. They are not lesser sins to be tolerated; they belong to the old self that has been put off, and they are to be removed with the same seriousness.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Sins of temper and tongue (anger, malice, slander, obscene talk, lying) often excused as minor
- The relational nature of these sins: they wound the body of Christ
- Congregations eroded more often by tempers and gossip than by scandal
- Speech as a revealer of the heart; the new self speaks differently

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Paul take sins of temper and tongue so seriously?
- What do these sins do to a congregation over time?
- Why do we tend to excuse these sins more easily than others?

Question 8

Student Question:

Our words and our temper reveal what is really in our hearts. Think about your speech and your anger over the past week, especially toward those closest to you. Where do your words and reactions not yet match the new self, and what would it look like to put those sins away?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self question turns the spotlight on the student's own speech and temper, especially toward those closest to them. We often reserve our worst words and reactions for the people we are most comfortable with, our family and fellow believers, precisely the relationships Paul most wants protected.

Invite an honest review of the past week: words spoken in anger, a piece of gossip passed along, a sharp reaction, a small dishonesty or exaggeration. The aim is not to induce shame but to bring the gap between the old self and the new into the light where it can be dealt with.

Then move toward putting these sins away concretely: apologizing where words have wounded, refusing to pass on the next piece of gossip, pausing before the angry reply, telling the truth where it would be easier to shade it. Encourage students to name one specific pattern of speech or temper to put away this week, and one relationship where the new self most needs to show up.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Reserving our worst speech and temper for those closest to us
- Honest review of recent words and reactions without sinking into shame
- Concrete repair: apology, refusing gossip, pausing before the angry reply, truth-telling
- Naming one pattern to put away and one relationship to mend

Discussion Prompts

- Where did your words or temper this week not match the new self?
- Why do we so often treat those closest to us the worst?
- What is one specific way to put away a sin of speech or temper this week?

Question 9**Student Question:**

Paul says you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its Creator, and then declares that here there is not Greek and Jew, slave and free, but Christ is all, and in all (vv. 9–11). What does it mean that the new self is being renewed into the image of God, and how does being in Christ break down the divisions that the world treats as ultimate?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinally richest question of the lesson, and it draws together the theology beneath all the commands. Paul says you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its Creator, and then sweeps away the world's divisions: here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free, but Christ is all, and in all (vv. 9–11).

Begin with the wardrobe image. The old self has been put off and the new self put on, decisively, in our union with Christ (this happened, as chapter 2 showed, in our death and resurrection with Him). Yet the new self is being renewed, an ongoing process. So sanctification is both a settled fact (we have put on the new self) and a continuing work (it is being renewed). This guards students from two errors: thinking they must achieve a new self by effort (no, it has been put on in Christ) and thinking transformation is automatic (no, it is being renewed, and we participate by putting off and putting on).

Now draw out the goal of this renewal: after the image of its Creator. Here is a profound truth about salvation. Humanity was made in God's image, and that image was defaced by sin. In Christ, God is restoring His image in us, re-creating us to look like Him. Sanctification is not arbitrary rule-keeping; it is the recovery and completion of what we were made to be, conformity to the image of God seen perfectly in Christ (who is Himself, as 1:15 said, the image of God). To grow in holiness is to become more truly human, more like our Creator.

Then teach the new humanity of verse 11. In Christ the old dividing lines lose their ultimacy: ethnic (Greek and Jew), religious-ceremonial (circumcised and uncircumcised), cultural (barbarian, Scythian), and social (slave, free). These distinctions, over which the world fights and bleeds, do not determine a person's standing in Christ. The church is one new people drawn from every kind. Paul is not erasing all differences but denying that they divide or rank us before God; what matters now is Christ, who is all, and in all. Compare Galatians 3:27–28.

Bring it home in both doctrine and life. Doctrinally: salvation is God remaking us into His image and forming one new humanity in Christ. Practically: this calls the church to a unity that refuses the world's divisions, welcoming and valuing one another across every line, because in the new self what defines us is not our ethnicity, status, or background but Christ, who is all and in all. Help students see that the put off and put on of personal holiness and the breaking down of divisions are two parts of one work: God is creating a new humanity that looks like Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The new self put on decisively in Christ, yet being renewed as an ongoing work (sanctification as fact and process)
- Renewal after the image of the Creator: salvation as the restoration of God's image, defaced by sin
- Holiness as becoming truly human, conformed to the image of God seen in Christ (1:15)

- The new humanity in Christ where ethnic, ceremonial, cultural, and social divisions lose their ultimacy (Galatians 3:27–28)
- Christ is all and in all: identity defined by Christ, not by background or status
- Personal holiness and the breaking down of divisions as two parts of one new-creation work

Discussion Prompts

- How is the new self both already put on and still being renewed?
- What does it mean that we are being renewed into the image of our Creator?
- How does being in Christ relativize the divisions the world treats as ultimate?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across this passage. Paul lifts your eyes to the reigning Christ, secures your life in Him, calls you to strip off the old and put on the new, and folds you into a new humanity where Christ is all. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through these verses. What is the single truth from Colossians 3:1–11 that you most need to carry into this coming week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone gathers the passage: the reigning Christ above, our life hidden in Him, the stripping off of the old self, the putting on of the new, and the new humanity where Christ is all. The student's task is to name one specific way Christ is forming them through it.

Walk back through the movement as a prompt. Some students most need to set a wandering mind on things above. Some need to relocate their life and identity in Christ. Some need to put a specific sin to death. Some need to put away a habit of speech or temper. Some need to embrace a brother or sister across a line they have quietly kept. Let each name what meets them.

Close by reminding students that the goal is formation, not information. Paul wrote so that risen people would actually live like risen people, upward toward Christ and outward toward one another. Invite each to carry one truth into the week and to become, a little more, who they already are in Christ.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The upward and outward movement of the passage as its arc
- Formation, not mere information, as the goal
- Carrying one concrete truth into the week
- Becoming in practice who we already are in Christ

Discussion Prompts

- Which truth from this passage most needs to take root in you this week?
- Is the step you most need upward (toward Christ) or outward (toward others)?
- How can this group help you put off the old and put on the new in the days ahead?