

## **Colossians 3:1-17 Transformed Minds and Lives February 12, 2006**

### **A Sermon by Pastor Brad Smith**

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**The sermon in a sentence:** Study (repetition, concentration, comprehension, and reflection) will transform our minds and lives.

**Why I am preaching it:** In order to encourage the congregation to study by giving them an example of studying a Bible passage.

As Pastor Wayne mentioned last week, study sometimes gets a bad rap. We may remember from our school days that we had to study things that did not interest us. But if we are curious about something, if we want to know about it, everything changes. Young children are terrific students of life, because they are curious about everything. Think of all the “why” questions that they ask. Have you ever tried taking a brisk walk with a young child? Impossible. They need to stop and to study the bugs and the flowers and the dirt.

I remember as a little boy wandering out to my grandmother’s back yard and discovering a small anthill, with red ants fighting black ants. I was fascinated! I could have stayed there all day. I was studying without even knowing it.

That example had nothing to do with books. As Pastor Wayne mentioned last week, a deep study of nature, or of human relations, or of all kinds of things will bring you back to God, the Creator of all good things.

But there is value in studying books, and particularly in studying the Bible. We can study it with the same wonder and curiosity that little children have in studying their surroundings. If we do, it will transform our lives. In our church life meeting the Saturday before last, one of the participants commented that the Bible teaches us that a transformed character comes from a renewed mind. And study is a primary way to renew our minds.

But today’s message is not mainly about the benefits of study. It is more a “how to” sermon. I hope that by the end you will have an idea of how you can study the Bible by yourself, or in a small group. Let’s go through this morning’s passage with Foster’s four steps of study that Pastor Wayne mentioned last week: Repetition, Concentration, Comprehension, and Reflection.

Foster and his mentor Dallas Willard both emphasize how important it is to memorize the Scriptures. Today's passage says that the word of Christ is to dwell or live in us. If it lives in us, it is available to us at any time, even if we do not have our Bibles handy. The only way for the word to live in us is to memorize it. I know that some people feel like it is impossible to memorize. I figured that I had better practice what I preach, so I decided to memorize today's passage and to see what tips I could offer to others. I found that to memorize, I needed to use Foster's first two steps of study: Repetition, and Concentration.

In last week's Discipleship Hour group, a nurse shared with us how learning something, and especially repeating something, actually makes physical changes in our brains. It is like digging a ditch that determines where the water will flow. I like the idea of my brain changing so God's word will flow through it.

So here is what I did in order to memorize the passage. You will see that I went back and forth between repetition, and concentration. First I typed the passage out on a piece of paper—even that was a way of repeating it. Then I carried the paper around with me and read it over from time to time. If I was alone, I read it out loud. That way my mouth and tongue were helping me to memorize, and not just my mind. I wasn't trying to memorize it at that stage; I just kept reading it to get familiar with it. Those who are more technological could put it on your pda.

Then I made a copy of my paper and removed all the verse numbers. I cut out each verse separately so I had seventeen strips of paper, each with one verse on it. Then I mixed them up and tried to put them in order. At first I got some of them wrong, but eventually I was able to do it. That was a way of concentrating on the passage.

Once they were in order, I would read the whole thing aloud. Then I would try to say the verses without looking. Once I knew a verse, I took that strip away and worked on the verses that I didn't know yet. If I had been trying to memorize a shorter passage of one or two verses, then I would have cut out each word and tried putting them in order. Most of us don't have big chunks of time to do these kinds of things, but that works to our advantage. Working on memorization for 10 minutes three times a day (coffee break, lunch, and after dinner, for example) produces better results than one 30 minute session.

Here's another way you can memorize: Take your piece of paper and read it through. Then take a marking pen and blacken every tenth word. Read it again and see if you can fill in the missing words. Once you can, then blacken out some more words and try again. If it is a shorter passage, blacken out every third or fourth word to begin with. That's concentration.

A friend in Canada who uses the computer in his work said that he keeps a Bible passage open on his computer screen. Whenever he gets bored or frustrated, he switches to that screen and reads the passage. Just by doing that, he is starting to memorize the verses.

Here's another idea: Have somebody read the passage out loud to you, and perhaps repeat after them verse by verse. Or they read one verse, and you try to recite the next verse. If you have children or grandchildren they will like to help you, and they will end up memorizing some of it without even trying.

I figured that I could memorize more easily if I could find some patterns in the passage. I noticed that every list in the passage has five items:

v. 5: Sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, and greed.

v. 8: Anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language

v. 11: Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free

v. 12: Compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience

v. 16: Teach, admonish, sing psalms, hymns, spiritual songs

And so, little by little, I memorized the verses. However, just memorizing a passage will not transform us. It is said that Nikita Khrushchev memorized quite a bit of Scripture as a child in the Russian Orthodox Church, but he grew up to be the atheist leader of the Soviet Union. We have to understand it, or comprehend it. That is step 3.

The way to begin understanding something is to ask myself questions, to discover what I do not yet understand. Let's try with verses 1-4. You might want to have a Bible or the Tower in front of you and look along with me.

In a general way I can tell from these 4 verses that I am supposed to be focused on God and not focused on earthly things. But there is a lot that is unclear. To get at the meaning of all this I might look at a study Bible or a commentary, and I might become part of a small group Bible study.

Here are some questions that verse 1 brings to my mind: What does it mean that I am raised with Christ? What are “things above”? What is the right hand of God? What does “set your heart” mean? If I look in a commentary or a study Bible, I will find that when Jesus Christ rose from the grave, there is a sense in which everybody who trusts him rose with him. He, and we, received a new, God-centered life. I will also find that in the Bible, “heart” is not the seat of emotions only, but it is where decisions are made. Finally, I will find that “the right hand of God” is the place of supreme power and authority.

Looking at verse 2, I might wonder what “earthly things” are. I don’t have to look in a commentary to find out what Paul means by “earthly things” and “things above,” because he says what he means in the next few verses.

“Earthly things” include sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, and greed. They also include anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language. Everything in those two lists destroys relationships. Looking at the first list, sexual immorality, lust, and greed all involve using other people or taking advantage of them to get what I want. Looking at the second list, I notice that it has to do both with my inner life and my outer life. Anger is something within me; rage is the outward expression of anger. Malice is an inner desire to harm someone else; slander is one way actually to harm them.

“Things above” are just the opposite of earthly things. Paul lists compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. He also mentions forgiveness, love, peace, thankfulness, knowing God’s word, teaching and encouraging one another, praising God, and doing everything in the name of Jesus. That means doing it the way Jesus would do it.

In verse 3, I might wonder what it means that Christ is hidden. As I think about it, I will remember that after Jesus rose, he went to be at the right hand of God. We cannot see him the way the apostles did. In some parts of the world, people have never heard of Jesus. Many more people have heard of him, but just think of him as a dead teacher. He really is hidden from view.

When I get to verse 4, I might ask myself, “What does it mean that Christ will appear?” My commentary or my own study of the Bible will remind me of the many promises that Jesus will come again in great power to wipe out

sin. Everybody will see him. All his followers will be taken with him into the very presence of God.

A good way to see if you understand something is to try and put it in your own words. Here is my attempt with Colossians 3:1-4:

“Since you have a new God-life in you, decide to live in the way that Jesus did. He has the power to make you able to live that new life. Think about ways to build people up, and don’t even consider your old way of life that used to tear people down. You have nothing to do with that old life any more. Your model is the life of Jesus, who has gone to be with his Father. And he’s coming back! He will take you to where that old, sinful life has disappeared, and there is nothing left but God himself.”

So we have gotten through three of our four steps of study: repetition, concentration, and comprehension. But for us to be transformed, we need to take the final step of reflection, or considering it and applying all this in our lives today. It is at this point that the change or transformation takes place. Reflection happens best not by ourselves, but in a small group.

Two applications jumped out at me. Yours might be different. Verse 1 says to make decisions based on things above. Verse 2 says to think about things above. I want to make my decision based on compassion, kindness, forgiveness and love, and to think about those things as well. It would help if I reported my goal to a small group, had them pray for me, and if I could let them know how I was doing week by week.

The other application for me came from verse 4. Jesus is coming again, and I will be with him. What will he think of what I have done with my life when he returns? That thought helps me to evaluate what I am doing with my life. It motivates me to change. I have in my office an African sculpture of a man blowing an animal horn, which is what the Bible means by a trumpet. When I look at it, I am reminded that according to the Bible, the trumpet will sound, and Jesus will return in power. Again, it would help me if I had a small group to share my plans with, and to help me evaluate how I am using my time and energy in light of Jesus’ return.

So there it is. We can be transformed by repeating, concentrating on, understanding, and applying the words of the Scriptures. And a good place to get started, or to continue, would be our Lenten groups. I have asked

Etsuko Craven (1<sup>st</sup> service)/Keijiro Hashimoto (second service) from the Nihongo congregation to share with us how her/his participation in a small group has helped his/her Christian life. Let us pray.