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College Baptist Church

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Bearing Fruit in Every Good Work
Colossians 1:3-14

Affirmation #8: Christian Conduct

“We believe that a Christian should live for the glory of God and the well-being of his fellow men; that his conduct should be blameless before the world; that he should be a faithful steward of his possessions; and that he should seek to realize for himself and others the full stature of maturity in Christ.”

Today we're studying the 8th Affirmation of the 12 that make up the doctrinal statement of the Baptist General Conference. The focus this week is on our conduct as believers in Jesus Christ. In Francis Shaeffer's famous question, How should we then live?

The Word of God in our 1st Affirmation pointed us to the bedrock, the foundation, the ground on which we stand, which is God himself, the triune God in three persons. And so the doctrine of God occupied us for the next four weeks, as we studied the Trinity and each of the three persons of the Godhead.

Next we asked how we come to stand on this eternally sturdy ground? How do we come to take root in this nourishing, life-giving ground that is God? And the answer we find in scripture is: by a new birth; by regeneration. We have to die to this shallow, unfertile Earth that seems so attractive from our short-run earthly perspective and be transplanted and born again to put our roots down in this rich, divine, everlasting soil. That was our sixth week.

Then last week we saw how our goal in taking root in God is to reflect his glory, to show what God is truly like, what his image is, so that that image is on full display and so that all the world around us can see a captivating picture of the character of God. And God is a Trinity. God exists forever in a relationship of love between the Father and the Son through the Holy Spirit. So we can only fulfill our purpose by living in that same kind of community of love through the Holy Spirit. And that community is the church. The local church in which we believe does not exist, we said, just to provide human community. It exists to show the world the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. That was the 7th Affirmation.

Today we consider what it means in action to live in that community of love with our roots going down deep into the life-giving ground of God. How do we conduct ourselves? And, just as importantly, there is a very challenging and much debated question: why should we conduct ourselves that way?

In his introduction to his letter to the church at Colossae, Paul answers those questions about as clearly as anyplace else in scripture. So let's begin here and see what answers he has to offer. The doctrines we affirm are only as strong as the biblical foundation on which they stand.

The answer he gives is about as simple and straightforward as you can imagine. You're a tree that has been transplanted into kingdom soil now. (V.13) You're delivered out of the domain of darkness and transferred to the kingdom of God's beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. You've been given new life and a fresh hope. You're a transplanted tree. What should you do now? You do what trees do. You sprout leaves and you bear fruit. There it is in v.10 -- bear fruit in every good work, increasing in the knowledge of God, walking in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to the Lord.

Bear fruit. That's what trees do. But bear the kind of fruit of the tree that you are. Not a tree of the world that bears the world's fruit of sin. You shall be holy, God says, for I the Lord am holy. Bear holy fruit. Because you've been born again. You're a new creature, transplanted in holy ground. You're a holy tree. What does a holy tree do? It grows and it bears holy fruit.

A tree that's not growing and bearing fruit is a dead tree. But in Christ we are alive. So we grow. And we bear fruit.

The answer to the question what do we do as a church of regenerated believers is in a sense that simple. And most of us wouldn't have much more difficulty even fleshing out what bearing fruit looks like. For the most part we know pretty clearly what morality and living a holy life looks like. It's there in our bulletin every week in the same words it is in the Affirmation: We believe that a Christian should live for the glory of God. We believe that a Christian

should live for the well-being of his fellow men; that his conduct should be blameless before the world; that he should be a faithful steward of his possessions; and that he should seek to realize for himself and others the full stature of maturity in Christ.

It looks like worship and love and growing in knowledge and living with endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father -- bearing fruit in every good work; showing the "fruits of the Spirit." So there's not much need, I think, to remind us what holiness and morality and good work looks like.

What I want to do instead is to try to seek out the biblical answer to what might be a few of the more difficult and confusing aspects of this call to holiness in the Christian life, because it's not always so simple as I've just described it, is it?

If I'm a Christian, why isn't living a life of holiness as easy as being an apple tree and just naturally growing apples? If it were, Paul wouldn't have to remind the Colossians, and have to be in ceaseless prayer for the Colossians, and have to command the Colossians to bear fruit in every good work.

Further, if I'll only get around to living a holy life if I'm commanded to be holy and if I finally get motivated to discipline myself with a lot of hard work to conduct myself like a Christian, then is the Bible sending me right back to the law again a moment after the gospel has just rescued me from all of the demands of the law?

Why do we have to be worried about Christian conduct at all now that we're under grace? Is it just to get a bigger crown or a better mansion in heaven? Wouldn't it be better if we weren't so anxious about being so blameless and loving and holy and just settled for being in heaven no matter how big a mansion or a crown we wind up with?

All this concern about holiness and how much treasure I'm laying up in heaven is just going to cut me off from the world I'm supposed to love and relate to as a Christian anyway, isn't it? Too much concern about this Affirmation of Christian conduct and I'll be so holier than thou and so heavenly minded that I won't be of any earthly good!

At least some of those questions come to mind, don't they, when you think about trying to live a holier life from Monday to Saturday? It's one thing to know what Christian conduct is. That's pretty simple to figure out most of the time. What's hard is coming up with the motivation and the discipline and the reasons to choose holiness instead of laziness and to choose obedience instead of sin; to overcome the rationalizations against living like the world instead of blameless before the world.

So, while I acknowledge there are some moral grey areas that occasionally make it tricky to know what's the right thing to do, I'm going to assume that most of the time our biggest challenge is not knowing what's moral and what's immoral, but instead we wrestle more with the why question and our motivation to obey. This morning, I've isolated out 4 of these harder questions that I want to hear Paul and the other biblical authors answering, here in Colossians 1 and in other places:

1. Why doesn't being holy come as easy to us as bearing fruit does to a tree, when that's the metaphor Paul uses?
2. Why does the Bible have to command us to do what it tells us is now our new reborn nature to do?
3. Once I'm saved by faith, does the obedience of sanctification take me back to good works if I want to go on from making Christ my Savior to make him my Lord? And,
4. Does all this concern in v.12 about being qualified to share in the inheritance of the saints in light make me so future- and heavenly minded that I'll be of no earthly good?

Question #1, then: If being born again makes me a new creature and means I have the Holy Spirit working in my heart so that I welcome the things of God instead of reject them, if I'm a new kind of tree with my roots sunk into God now instead of the world, how is it that bearing fruit doesn't come more natural to me. I should bear fruit. That's what trees do, we said. Be holy, God says, for I the Lord am holy. But living without sin just doesn't seem that easy, does it?

In part, that's because we've made the analogy a little too simple. Look at what Paul says about bearing fruit a little earlier in vv.5-6. "We have heard of your love because of the hope that is laid up for you in heaven. You have heard

of this hope in the word of the truth, the gospel. And the gospel has come to you, as indeed in the whole world, it is bearing fruit and growing, as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth."

What is growing? What is actually bearing the fruit? The *gospel* is bearing fruit. Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit, in the message of the Word of truth is bearing fruit. We are only going to bear fruit when the good news of Jesus Christ bears fruit in and through us. We don't do this of our own. The gospel has its roots deep down into God and the gospel is nourished with the love and joy of the Holy Spirit that so deeply fulfills the Godhead that God overflows in love and mercy even to undeserving sinners. And so it is to the power of the gospel that bearing fruit comes so naturally, and it will to us when we're drawing deeply on the gospel's power by the dependence of our faith.

That's why Paul's analogy doesn't quite call us the tree with the roots that go down into God. In Rom 11, he says instead that we are branches that get grafted into the tree. "Remember," he says (11:18), "it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you." It has also been supporting Israel, he reminds the church, and yet some of those Israelite branches were broken off because they didn't believe. Faith is what keeps us grafted to the tree of the good news and the promises of God. (V.20)

"They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. ... And if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you." Faith keeps us grafted to the tree of God's power and (v.23) "God has the power to graft in the branches."

In a different analogy that we heard Paul speak about last week, Christ is the Bridegroom, and we the church are the bride. Christ is Hosea in the marriage. We are Gomer, the sinful, unfaithful, prostitute. We've sold our love of Christ away to the world, and still Christ has come looking for us in the marketplace to purchase us back in his love.

He invites us to be his for a simple act of faith. We say "I do" and all his heavenly goods he us endows. We marry into this inheritance. It's not ours by nature. It's ours by the faith that keeps us united to the Bridegroom. And, still, the endowment and the inheritance of the Groom is legally ours. God looks at us as legal heirs, not because we are good, but because by faith we are legally united with Christ.

So it's Christ's inheritance that makes us eternally rich. And it's Christ's roots that go down into the rich, nourishing soil. And it's Christ's gospel that bears fruit in us, provided we rest in trust in his ingrafting work. In one sense that resting is the simplest thing in the world. A little child can do it. It just requires giving up our self-reliance to rely instead on the better promises of God. But in another sense, our pride and our love of self fights this dependence on Christ and struggles hard to keep on being the fruit-bearing power.

The stronger and more experienced we become in the worlds we think we can control, the harder it becomes to give up that control to depend on someone greater. Allowing the gospel to bearing fruit in us by the power of God's glorious might may be easy for a child (for to such belongs the kingdom of God), but it is the most difficult thing in the world for our pride.

By the grace of God our pride is not won over all at once to total and utter dependence. God honors our humanity by dealing with us as creatures with reason who respond to the growing weight of evidence, and he wins us and he woos us according to our nature. Just like we grow up from milk to meat, Peter says (1 Pet 2:2) we should grow up to salvation. In Eph 4:15, Paul says we should "grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ."

The grafting has decisively begun. The nourishment of the gospel is flowing into our former dead branches. It is clear and certain what sort of new tree we now are. But God has willed that it happens through growth. Like a plant. Like a human. According to our nature. And so we live like children, certain of the promised inheritance that is ours as children of a gloriously rich Father, full of hope already, but not yet in full possession of all that will one day be ours.

Why is it then that being holy doesn't come as easily to us as bearing fruit does to a tree? Because the faith that grafts us into the tree isn't the instant gratification the world wants of the treasure in my hands today. It's the assurance today of things hoped for and the conviction of promises not yet seen. That kind of confidence is the sort that grows the human way: with the growing evidence of trustworthiness that makes us ever more secure in future

promises -- but still vulnerable to the seductions of the world's more instant gratifications. When we take our eyes off the hope, it becomes a struggle, a fight of faith, to stay grafted.

So now we can answer much more quickly the second question I listed: Why does the Bible have to command us to do what it tells us is now our new reborn nature to do?

The answer is that as re-born creatures, we do have a new nature, but that new nature is still growing, still living by faith in promises of an inheritance that we do not yet have fully in our hands. The reality we don't yet see. It is present to us as a hope, as a confidence, as a trust. Because the world can put shinier, visible things in our hand, we need the commands of scripture to call us back to our hope. What the new birth means is that, unlike our old self, we are receptive to the commands. We welcome the commands. We know that they are calling us back to better things. And so the commands themselves come with the power that helps the fruit to grow.

Wake up! You're going to be late for your 8:00 exam! your roommate commands. And the command wakes you up and gets you to the exam in time.

Look out! And the command from the passenger to the distracted driver keeps the car safe from an accident.

Remember your diet! commands the sticky note on the refrigerator, and it motivates you to take the celery instead of the ice cream.

Take the longer bypass around the city, commands the set of directions your friend gave you to get to his house, and even though it looks shorter to go straight, you get to his house an hour sooner because you missed the downtown traffic you couldn't see ahead of you.

Bear fruit in every good work! Paul commands his fledgling little grafted Colossian branches on the tree of the gospel, and their happy hearts say thanks for those directions and they strengthen the faith that keeps them united to the tree, and they grow, and by their new nature they do bear fruit.

Why does the Bible have to command us to do what it tells us is now our new reborn nature to do? For the believer, the command is the welcome means by which the grace of the gospel does its saving, growing work.

So, now the answer to Question #3 should be clearer: Once I'm saved by faith, does the obedience of sanctification take me back to good works if I want to go on from making Christ my Savior and make him also my Lord?

It surely does not take us back to the kind of good works by which we might have been trying to be saved. It surely does not take us back to a reliance upon our own strength and our own goodness, as if going through the motions of God's commands in some outward way would ever impress God to reward us, or obligate God as if he had to reimburse us for our efforts.

Once I'm saved by faith, the obedience of sanctification comes from an entirely different motive and nature. The way the re-born, new creature responds to God's commands is not to say these are my duties now that I'm a slave. The new nature now hears the commands of God the way a patient hears the advice of a doctor about how to get better, or the way an oversleeping roommate hears his friend command him to wake up and get to the test before it's too late.

Thank you! we say. If anybody is doing the good works here, we think, it's the doctor, it's the roommate who woke us up -- even if the therapy the doctor gave us was painful and even if waking up suddenly and racing off to a test isn't such a pleasant thing by itself. In light of the promises we're pursuing--to get well if we're sick; to pass a test, if we're taking a class -- the difficult thing we may have had to be disciplined to do was welcome in the long run and we don't think the doctor or the roommate is obligated to us. We feel grateful and obligated to them.

The commands in Scripture that call us to Christian conduct -- to live for the glory of God and the well-being of our fellow men, to conduct ourselves blameless before the world, to be faithful stewards of our possessions, to realize the full stature of maturity in Christ -- do not come to us as chores that have to be obeyed as duties, or unpleasant tasks that God had better reimburse us for someday with heaven. They come to us as welcome advice about how to get well from the disease of pride and sin that still drags us down in this world.

We don't obey him because he's pulling rank on us as our Lord. We obey him because he's still rescuing us from the deadly sickness of sin, and he has the key to our health. There's something wrong with this question that asks if Christian conduct is the way to go on from making Christ my savior to making him my Lord. The whole premise may be backwards! When we first respond to Christ by throwing down our weapons of sinful opposition against his being God and Bridegroom in our life, we finally for the first time acknowledge him as Lord. Then we go on from there to let him release us one by one from the practical clutches of our sins and in so doing to be our rescuer and our Savior.

The obedience of sanctification is the obedience of faith, or else it isn't doing anything to make us more holy. We will only grow in holiness, and we will only be rescued from the clutches of our sins to the degree that we go on every day and every moment to rest more and more confidently, in greater and greater faith, in the commands and counsel of the Great Physician who wants to give us the grace of eternal health (Lat: *salus* --> salvation).

So, finally, Question #4, Does all this concern in v.5 about the hope that is laid up for me in heaven, and the concern in v.12 about being qualified to share in the inheritance of the saints in light make me so future- and heavenly minded that I'll be of no earthly good?

If living for the glory of God is an act of faith that believes the glory of God is where I'm going to find all my nourishment and all my joy and all my health and all my satisfaction, then this question has its premises all the way backwards, too. The only way I am going to be of any earthly good to anyone is if I can come to them to give and not to take and to drain. I need to be confident in my own eternal health and joy if I am ever going to be in a position to give unconditionally for the well-being of my fellow humans. And the only way I am going to have that security in my own future is if there is a sure hope laid up for me in heaven.

Unless I am utterly and totally heavenly-minded, I'll never manage to bear fruit in every good work for the benefit of anyone around me. If the inheritance of the saints in light is not a sure promise I can bank my hope on for ever and ever, the infinite hole in my soul that craves to be filled with eternity will always be looking for other people to do a good work for me by contributing to my needs, and I won't be free and happy to bear fruit in good work for them.

Christian conduct doesn't promise to be easy. It can sometimes involve some painful therapy. But, by faith, Christian conduct is always joyful, because of its promise to lead to a more sin-rescued, God-saturated end. Christ even endured the cross because of the joy that was set before him.

Christian conduct has to be commanded, even for new creatures who are naturally born to bear fruit. Because the command is the welcome means by which the new, reborn creature naturally comes to bear fruit.

The only obedience of Christian conduct that works in us the therapy of holiness is an obedience of faith that keeps us dependently grafted into the vine. And the vine is Christ.

Only when our eyes are on him, only when we are altogether heavenly minded, is our Christian conduct ever going to prove of any earthly good. No matter how outwardly good our behavior may appear, if it doesn't fill us with Christ, if it doesn't bring Christ to the world, it is an artificial substitute for Christian conduct and it fails completely to love, because it withholds the one thing this world needs above all things: the security of God himself.

Let's focus our eyes on Christ and the hope that is laid up for us in heaven, so that our conduct in the world truly will bring glory to God and well-being to those around us wherever they are, locally, nationally, globally.

Christian conduct is conduct that rests wholly in faith on the promises of Jesus Christ and that has its vision into the future focused where Jesus Christ is focused -- every moment on the promises of God.