

# Spiritual Reality & Spiritual Mentality

## *A Study of Colossians 3:1-4*

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### Text (ESV)

<sup>1</sup> If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. <sup>2</sup> Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. <sup>3</sup> For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. <sup>4</sup> When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

### Introduction

Colossians is essentially divided into two halves. The first half, consisting of chapters 1-2, is a doctrinal section. The start of chapter 3 signals the beginning of the second half, which focuses more on practical Christian living. The “verb river” graphic below, generated from Logos Bible Software, shows the distribution of imperative-mood verbs throughout the book of Colossians. Note that imperatives are almost absent from the first two chapters, but occur regularly in chapters 3-4.



#### Mood

- indicative
- participle
- subjunctive
- infinitive
- imperative

## Analysis

In verses 1-4 Paul gives two commands—to *seek* and to *focus*. Furthermore, the Colossian believers are to take these actions because of the reality of their identification with Christ. The first half of verse 1 illustrates the theme well: “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above . . . .”

The practical expressions of spiritual *mentality*—the believer’s acts of seeking and focusing—are to find their root in the spiritual *reality* of what God has done for him or her. Therefore, in studying this text, we will focus first on understanding our identification with Christ, and then proceed to learn about the mental disciplines that naturally follow.



## Spiritual Reality: The Believer’s Identification with Christ

Already in Colossians Paul has alluded to resurrection with Christ (2:12) and death with Christ (2:20). Now, in verses 1 and 3, he refers to these realities as the basis for distinctively Christian living. The most extensive discussion of these concepts in the New Testament is found in Romans 6.

Through identification with Christ, the believer not only participates with Christ in his death and resurrection, but also in his seating at God’s right hand and in his future appearing.

Aspect of Identification with Christ	Other New Testament References
Death (v. 3)	Rom. 6:2-3, 6-7, 11; Gal. 2:20; Col. 2:20
Resurrection (v. 1)	Rom. 6:4-5, 8, 11, 13; Eph. 2:5; Col. 2:12
Seating (implied by v. 1)	Eph. 2:6
Appearing (v. 4)	1 John 3:2

Christ is said to be seated at God’s right hand (v. 1), and since the believer’s life is hidden in Christ with God, it is implied that the believer is there. This is made explicit in Ephesians 2:6.

We look forward to Christ’s end-time appearing (or revelation). This will be a time of reward for faithful service (1 Peter 5:4), so we are urged to remain in God/Christ (1 John 2:28) until that time. Not only will Christ be appear (be revealed), but we will also appear (be revealed) with him (1 John 3:2). Romans 8:18-19, 23 convey essentially the same idea, but use *apokalyptō/apokalypsis* rather than *phaneroō*.

As we transition to talk about spiritual mentality, let us remember that we are called to godly thinking and living because of the reality of who we are in Christ.

## Spiritual Mentality: The Believer's Focus on Things That Are above

Verses 1-2 contain two imperative verbs—two directives for Christians to follow. Essentially, we are to *seek* and *set our minds* on a category of things that are said to be *above*. A little later in the lesson we will talk about what Paul means when he refers to “things that are above.” Right now we will look at the two directives.

### Two Imperatives

The two imperatives translate present-tense Greek verbs. The *NET Bible* conveys the sense:

- “keep seeking the things above” (v. 1)
- “Keep thinking about things above” (v. 2)

### Seek

What does it mean to seek something? It has to do with spending energy to find, achieve, attain, or obtain something. Below are examples of things that people may seek. All of the texts in parentheses use the verb *zēteō*, which verse 1 renders as “seek.”

- God's kingdom and righteousness (Matt. 6:33; Luke 12:31)
- God's blessings (Matt. 7:7-8; Luke 11:9-10)
- Things of material value (Matt. 13:45; 18:12)
- Miraculous signs (Luke 11:15-16; 11:29; 1 Cor. 1:22)
- Self-preservation (Luke 17:33)
- God's will (John 5:30)
- Others' approval (John 5:44; 1 Thess. 2:5-6)
- God's approval (John 5:44; Rom. 2:7; Gal. 1:10)
- Personal fame (John 7:4)
- God's glory (John 7:18)
- Self-righteousness (Rom. 10:3)
- Intellectual proof (1 Cor. 1:22)
- Change in marital status (1 Cor. 7:27)
- Personal wellbeing and interests (1 Cor. 10:24; 10:33; 13:5; 2 Cor. 12:14; Phil. 2:21)
- Others' wellbeing and interests (1 Cor. 10:24; 10:33; 2 Cor. 12:14)
- Christ's interests (Phil. 2:21)
- Use of spiritual gifts for the church's benefit (1 Cor. 14:12)

God intends for us to move beyond seeking the fulfillment of our own needs and wants, to seek the good of others and the glory of God. The following biblical texts exemplify this shift in aim:

- Matthew 6:33  
<sup>33</sup> But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

- 1 Corinthians 10:24, 31

<sup>24</sup> Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor.

[. . .]

<sup>33</sup> just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved.

- Philippians 2:21

<sup>21</sup> For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.

### *Set Your Minds*

What does it mean to set our minds on something? Below are examples of things that people may have as their mental focus. All of the texts in parentheses use the verb *phroneō*, which appears as “set your minds” in verse 2.

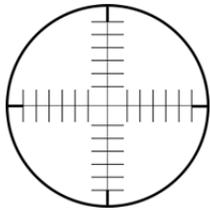
- God’s interests (Matt. 16:23; Mark 8:33)
- Man’s interests (Matt. 16:23; Mark 8:33)
- The flesh (Rom. 8:5)
- The Spirit (Rom. 8:5)
- Personal greatness/superiority (Rom. 12:3; 12:16)
- A day set apart for the Lord (Rom. 14:6)
- Unity with other Christians (Rom. 15:5; 2 Cor. 13:11; Phil. 2:2 [2x]; 4:2)
- Immature things (1 Cor. 13:11)
- A religious leader’s teaching—whether legitimate or not (Gal. 5:10)
- Others’ spiritual or physical welfare (Phil. 1:7; 2:4-5; 4:10 [2x])
- Progressive spiritual growth (Phil. 3:15)
- Earthly, sensual, destructive things—as distinct from things that are consistent with Christ’s cross and a future in heaven (Phil. 3:18-20)

An exchange between Peter and Jesus illustrates what it means to set one’s mind on something, and shows how easy it is to focus attention on the wrong kind of object.

- Matthew 16:21-23

<sup>21</sup> From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. <sup>22</sup> And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.” <sup>23</sup> But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”

It’s essential to seek and focus on the right things because we tend to achieve the things for which we aim. Right thinking leads to right behavior.



## Things That Are above

As noted before, we are to focus on “the things that are above” (*ta anō*). How are we to understand Paul’s use of this phrase?

- We are told in verse 1 that this is where Christ sits in a position of authority at the Father’s right hand.

- The *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* explains the significance of Christ’s position at God’s right hand:

The first [image] is one of prominence or favored position. . . . To be seated at the right hand is to occupy a position of recognition and prestige. . . . The messianic king is ordered to be seated at the right hand of the Lord, a position of conquest and rule (Ps 110:1; cf. Mt 22:44). Jesus announced his destiny to be seated at the right hand of God (Mk 14:62; Lk 22:69). (Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman 361)

To be at the right side is to be identified as being in the special place of honor (1 Kings 2:19; Ps 45:9). Thus the full participation of the risen Christ in God’s honor and glory is emphasized by his being at God’s right hand (Acts 2:33-34; Heb. 1:3). (728)

- Christ’s exaltation to the Father’s right hand was a key element in the early Christians’ understanding of Christ’s identity and power. It was part of Jesus’ self-testimony (e.g., Matt. 26:64). It was an essential aspect of the apostles’ witness to the Jews (e.g., Acts 2:33-35; 5:30-32). This theological theme is developed in the epistles by Paul (Rom. 8:34; Eph. 1:19-21) and others (Heb. 1:3-4; 10:12-13). The text below represents the New Testament’s teaching on this point.

- Ephesians 1:19-21

<sup>19</sup>and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might <sup>20</sup>that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, <sup>21</sup>far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.

- “Things that are above” (vv. 1, 2) stand in contrast to “things that are on earth” (v. 2). Examples of “things that are on earth” are mentioned in verse 5; they include sexual sins and greed.

Geisler explains:

- The “earthly things” (*ta epi tēs gēs*, lit., “things upon the earth,” 3:2; the same Gr. words are used in v. 5) to be avoided are moral, not physical (cf. immorality, impurity, lust, etc., in v. 5). Paul was not encouraging a kind of Gnostic disdain for material things.

Every physical thing God created, including the body and sex, is good (cf. Gen. 1:27-30; 1 Tim. 4:1-4). However, since having a physical body does give occasion for the works of the (moral) flesh (cf. Rom. 7:4-6), Paul warned against setting one's affections in this area and perverting God's purpose for them. (680)

- Other uses of *ta anō* in the New Testament shed additional light on the meaning:
  - John 8:23  
<sup>23</sup> He said to them, "You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world.
  - Galatians 4:26  
<sup>26</sup> But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother.
  - Philippians 3:14  
<sup>14</sup> I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

## Works Cited

Geisler, Norman L. "Colossians." *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty*. Ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck. New Testament ed. [Wheaton, IL]: Victor, 1983. 667-86.

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