THE PAULINE PARANESIS
AND SERMON APPLICATION:
THE ETHICAL APPLICATION OF
COLOSSIANS 3:1-4

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I. Introduction

Preaching is a task that God has ordained for the proclamation of his word. Preaching should be engaged in declaration, that is declaring what has happened in the Person and Work of Christ; the good news of the accomplishment of Christ on behalf of his people. The people of God need to hear this good news and to respond accordingly so that God would be pleased. Some have argued in this century that the sermon, if preached properly is enough, and these have denied the need for an application to the hearers in the sermon (Greidanus, 157ff; Bettler, 331ff). I can appreciate the reason why some would regard application as unnecessary, but I would like to suggest the Pauline ethic (or Pauline Paranesis) found in the New Testament to serve as a guide for how we as preachers ought to use the application in the sermon.

How the preacher applies the text, or how the imperative is based upon the indicative proclaimed, is an ethical question. It is one the preacher wants to be fully conscious and aware of, because of the ethical dangers of manipulation in sermon application. What we want to consider is how the modern preacher might attend not only to Paul’s inscripturated indicatives,
but to how he might also follow Paul’s inscripturated *imperatives*. We now want to turn to consider the Pauline Ethics as a model for Biblical preaching and application to the modern hearer. Sidney Greidanus has written,

> “Every properly selected preaching-text seeks to accomplish a specific goal among the original hearers: answer a question, comfort, encourage, correct, teach, motivate to obedience, praise, trust, etc. If preachers can delineate that specific goal, state the question to which the text is a focused response, they are halfway in conceiving a relevant sermon” (Greidanus, 173).

The Pauline Ethics have been understood as the *indicative* and the *imperative*. The indicative is the accomplished fact of what God has done for man’s salvation in Christ, revealed in history; the imperative is the commands of God toward man in light of the accomplished work in Christ. That is because who God is, and what he has accomplished for his people in Christ should have the primacy in preaching. This is the “indicative” of what God has done for man. The response to what God has done in Christ is called the “imperative.” The imperative is the response the people ought to have to this work of God in Christ. The response can come in many varieties of responses, but foremost ought to be in faith and repentance, as sinners are addressed by the Word of God and they conform their lives to this revealed truth.

Another way of thinking of the imperative is to ask the question: “How then should we live?” This question is raised in light of the completed work of Christ on behalf of the sinner. These two should never be separated one from the other. To have indicative without imperative can lead to license
and living in the Christian life with freedom and no goal or direction toward Christ-likeness (cf. Rom. 5:21-6:3); on the other hand, the imperative without the indicative can lead to legalism and bearing burdens too heavy for men to bear (Mt. 15:3ff; 23:1-4). We need to see both of them together. As in the Ten Commandments recorded in Exodus 20, we see that God does not give the imperative, the commands, until he states the indicative: “I am the God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of bondage...Now, therefore, have no other gods before me...”

A suggestion toward understanding both the indicative and the imperative is to realize that Christ’s work of fulfilling the “imperative” of God resulted in his people living by faith “in Christ” and participating in this “indicative”, or finished work of Christ. The people of God who are in Christ obey by faith, working through love (Gal. 5:6; cf. James 2:14ff).

Having considered the matter of indicative and imperative from the Scriptures, we now want to ask: How does the indicative and imperative in Paul’s letters instruct preachers on a healthy balance between the proclamation of the indicative of Christ’s Person and Work and the imperative or command that is to come in sermon application?
II. The Pauline Ethic as Inscripturation rather than Manipulation in Preaching

The methodology and goal of our preaching ought to be the proclamation of the Person and Work of Christ. This means that our preaching ought to be Christocentric, or Christ-centered. The power of God unto salvation is faith in Christ “clothed in the gospel,” according to Paul (Rom. 1:16; cf. Calvin, Institutes, III.2.vi). This power is found not in eloquence or superior wisdom, but in the power of the Spirit (1 Cor. 2:1-5). But the people of God need to ask the question in the sermon: “So what?” “What does this mean for me and how does this help me to live the Christian life out of gratitude to my Savior?” It is the “preaching with purpose” Dr. Adams has taught to us that preachers must keep in mind in sermon preparation. The sermon must have a purpose and therefore it should have application. But the question that is current in our time is that too many preachers not only fail to preach the text before the congregation, but that they can manipulate through their application (Greidanus, 120). How can preachers faithfully and ethically preach the gospel of Christ, being faithful to the text of Scripture, and at the same time teaching and commanding their congregation what they should do (imperative) in light of the text (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16-17)?

Some would say that the preacher must rid himself of all application because he might manipulate the text, he ought to just “get out of the way of the text” and allow it to “preach itself.” If it is done successfully, the
Spirit of God will apply the sermon and the direction to the people of God’s hearts. Well, there is great wisdom in this, but I think a bit unbalanced. We ought to never manipulate our congregations as preachers. We ought to always be faithful to the text we are preaching and to try jump out of the way of the text, if this means making it clearer and avoiding the “muddying up” of the water of the sermon. But we should also attend to Paul’s application as much as we attend to the truth he teaches in his letters. That is to say, that we ought to appreciate in our preaching the inscripturated “imperatives” of Paul as much as the truth of his “indicatives”. Both Paul’s indicatives and imperatives are God-breathed and inscripturated for the instruction of not only the preacher, but also for the parishioners who sit under his teaching. So how is this to be understood so that the sermon and the truth of how the congregation should respond is made clear? Can we find guidance in Paul’s letters to specific historical problems in the church; can we look to his letters as models for the preachers instruction in proclamation? I think we can.

I think that as we preach the one truth of the gospel in the variety of ways it is given (indicative), such as preaching narrative, poetry, history, epistles, etc, we can also preach the one application of Paul in a variety of ways. I am not saying that the only application for Paul is found in the way he applies the indicative to the imperative in specific situations, say to the Church at Corinth for example. I am saying that just as we find various
ways to preach the same truth because God has given us the gospel in a variety of ways, so we can appreciate the inscripturated application of Paul in his letters, but in its manifold applications.

We are indeed dealing with historical, ancient letters from Paul. We have a modern context, and the application of the preacher in the context of his own congregation can take the principles and models of Paul’s own application and be more effective as well as more ethical in the way he applies the message to the congregation. This would not only help to avoid missing the point of the sermon, but also avoid manipulating the congregation unethically with ideas and demands from the preacher. It would also serve to see the true connection and unified truth of Paul’s indicative and imperative.

While we have argued that Paul gives us both the indicative and the imperative, we want to appreciate how the preacher might find a model from his letters to preach the application of the sermon in a more ethical manner. It needs to be remembered that this is God’s Word and as such, not only should the sermon be faithful to the text, it should seek to be faithful to the ethical reality of doing real and true justice to the application of what Paul teaches. Again, we want to avoid manipulation because this is the Word of Truth and it does not manipulate, it changes people by the hearing of the Word and the work of the Spirit. In order to try to explore the
relationship of Paul’s ethics in indicative and imperative, we will now consider the text of Colossians 3:1-4 as a test case.

III. Colossians 3:1-4 as a Test Case for the Application of Sermons
The text of Colossians begins with an “if” clause (protasis): “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.” Prior to this, the Apostle Paul has been teaching the Church at Colossae of the truth of their being “in Christ” and that he has given them a “resurrection-strength” to grow in the Christian life. He encourages them that they have been delivered from the kingdom of darkness and God has truly transferred them into the Kingdom of his beloved Son (1:13-14). He teaches them of the unsurpassing and cosmic superiority of the exalted Christ and that their real hope is that Christ is “in them” (1:27).

In order to confront an incipient Gnosticism and Jewish mysticism, Paul gives Christ and the Christian life Materiality: body, form, substance, and turns the readers’ hyper-other-worldly Christianity toward the earth. The truth of the matter is, for Paul it was just in Christ’s bodily death and real blood shed for his people in space and time that was the true hope of believers. To state it in other words, Paul was teaching an earthy religion, over a religion of the mystic and abstract; a religion that precisely in its “earthy” character accomplished a salvation in time and space for real flesh and blood. This is Paul’s great indicative in the letter to the Colossians.
He writes to them that this is your true hope: their bodily resurrection from the dead because of the prototokos Christ, the first-born from the dead.

In the verses in 3:1-4, Paul is reaching back to 2:12 and reminding them of the truth that “you were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.” The indicative, the truth of the redemption accomplished in Christ’s Person and Work is the truth that leads Paul to have them consider a specific application or imperative.

These are believers at Colossae (Col. 1:2) and as believers, we all need repentance throughout the Christian life in order to be more obedient to the Father out of gratitude to him for what he has done (Calvin, Institutes, III.3.vi-ix). This is a life-long repentance (or regeneration as Calvin teaches) and repentance always goes hand in hand with believing. As John Murray has written: “Faith is always a penitent faith; repentance is always a believing penitence” (Murray, Redemption, 113; cf. Works, Vol. 2, 199; 262).

This is to be the ultimate response to any message of the gospel, but there are diverse ways of applying repentance and faith. It takes both of these for any response to the gospel, but the responses come in different ways throughout different seasons of the Christian’s life. However, for Paul he teaches the preacher that we can understand the indicative which he
has taught and also follow him on the application or imperatives of these truths.

In other words, as one commentator said about these verses (3:1-4), Paul instructs the Colossians to “become what they already are” (Gaffin, Unpublished Lecture Notes on Acts and Paul). Paul tells them since they truly have been resurrected with Christ (because they are “in Christ”), then they are to seek that things of where Christ is located (3:1). The “things above, where Christ is located at the right hand of God” is precisely his Kingdom. In another place, Jesus said that we should always be seeking first the Kingdom and all its righteousness and all the needs of this earth will be provided by our Heavenly Father. Paul is teaching that the Christian’s reality is in Christ, where he is located at the right hand of the Father. This stresses Christ’s life, death, resurrection and ascension and shows that as Christ was the first born from the dead, so those in Christ will appear with him (cf. Gaffin, Resurrection, 36; 43-44).

Paul teaches the Colossians because of the reality of being raised with Christ (indicative, 3:1- sungherqhte), now seek (imperative- zhteite) the things above. You see how Paul’s application immediately follows upon the truth or indicative of what God has done in Christ. There is not merely one or the other, that is indicative and imperative, but both working together - -both working by faith.
Paul then goes on to expand the imperative in v. 2: “Set (froneite) your minds on things above...” Then Paul goes on to explain again in v. 3 that “You have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God.” The reality of being “in Christ” forces Paul by the inspiration of the Spirit, to tell them the imperative of how they should think and live. The life of the Christian is so radically in Christ that he is to seek only the things above where Christ is, to set the mind on what Christ has done and the reality of his resurrection and ascension, and to realize that when Christ appears, then the Christian will be also appear with him in glory (3:4- u`mei/j su.n auvtw/| fanerwgh,sesqe evn do,xh|).

These truths, and the combination of these indicatives and imperatives in Paul’s letter to the Colossians, leads the apostle to show the true application of these truths and how they work out in the real life of Christians. Contrary to the incipient Gnosticism and Jewish mysticism that would raise the Christian into the abstract, Paul pulls the application of these truths of Christ down to the nitty-gritty, secular affairs of day-to-day life and living in all the joy and the struggles that are experienced as people living in Christ.

As we continue, we must be bearing in mind how this model can instruct the preacher who wants to faithfully preach the truths of these passages and apply the sermon without manipulation, or forcing and demanding the
people to do or act that which would be contrary to the Apostle Paul’s intent. We must remember that it is ultimately the work of the Holy Spirit that applies the Scripture, but He also uses the right application of the sermon as well to increase the faith in the believer and bring a true growth in the image of Christ. How can we learn from Paul’s application of these truths in Colossians 3:1-4 and apply them properly to our congregations, while appreciating the personal, individual, unique needs of the congregation to which we have been called as preachers? Another way of asking the question is: “How can preachers in their studies, who seek to bring the meaning of an ancient text to the modern people, avoid manipulation and ethically preach an application or imperative consistent with the indicative of the passage they are preaching?” Let us consider the application that the Apostle Paul uses in the text of Colossians.

In Colossians 3:5-17, Paul teaches the people to basically “become what you already are” in Christ. He teaches the people of the importance and the ability the Christian has now of putting to death what is earthly, such as fornication, impurity, passion, etc. He uses the language of the “walk” to describe the old walk prior to Christ, and the new walk of the Christian. He says in verse 8, to “put away” such behavior, because of the reality of verses 9-10: “…you have put off the old nature with its practices and have put on the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.”
He continues in 3:12: “Put on (Imperative-\textit{endusasqe}) (rather than sinful and earthly tendencies) compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience…” Paul particularly emphasizes the love of the Christian in verse 14; the peace and the community of the Christian life in verse 15; and the primacy and importance of the Word of Christ in developing Christian behavior. Paul says in verse 16: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God.” He then adds in v. 17 the consummate truth of life in Christ: “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

We can see from this application of truths so far, that the Apostle has explained the reality of the Christian life and the importance of the Word of Christ, love, peace, unity in fellowship, singing of psalms and hymns, and then he tells us that “whatever you do”- - that is, no matter how you live your earthly life, live it for the glory of God. Paul can say this, just because of the grace, the indicative, the truth of the Person and Work of Christ that precedes these imperatives.

We should notice how this application, though inscripturated in the letter to the Colossians, can be appreciated just as much in its form to the
preacher’s own congregation in the time that he lives in the modern context. How does this application help us to avoid manipulation and seeking to apply in our sermons something contrary to the actual indicative? In other words, how can the preacher use this model and form in order to be ethical in what he commands from his parishioners, and how they are to respond to the sermon? The preacher should desire not to bind men’s consciences, but to declare the imperatives, the commands of God and not his own. As the Westminster Confession of Faith says, “God alone is Lord of the conscience…” (WCOF, Chap. 20.2).

Paul teaches that in every aspect of life, these truths or indicatives work themselves out into application in living. The preacher has an inexhaustible supply of differing truths to apply, as many as he has diverse situations from the situations to which Paul wrote and addressed. But he also has the advantage of giving individuality and poignancy to the one truth in diverse and varied applications of the inscripturated application of Paul.

Paul sees the truth of Christ’s Person and Work in its relationship to everyday, common and secular affairs. In our relationships between wives and husbands (3:18-19), relationships in families between children and parents (3:20-21), even in the occupational arena such as slaves and masters, or employees and employers (3:22-4:6). These secular realities
of the Christian life are to be mastered just because our life is hidden in Christ, and Christ is our life (Col. 1:27; 3:3-4)! We have a Christ-centered existence in our resurrection with Christ from the dead and we are to live and walk in common affairs on this earth in order to glorify God. As the Westminster Shorter Catechism teaches us in question one: “The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever (in all aspects of our lives).”

In these passages as application, we see nothing but a shortened version of the Ten Commandments. We see how to love the Lord God with all our hearts, souls, minds, and strengths and our neighbors as ourselves. We see the glorious imperatives and the freedom for which Christ has set us free in order to live accordingly by His Spirit (Gal. 5:1ff). These passages in Colossians are a condensed lecture on Pauline ethics, and it can be quite helpful in instructing the preacher in how to apply his sermons.

Here is an application that broadly takes into consideration the everyday lives of God’s people, but in the context of the superiority of the Cosmic, Sovereign Christ who rules the real affairs of everyday people. Here is the exalted Christ and the truth of his Person and Work (indicative) and the answer to every single version of “How then should I live?” (imperative). This is the “how to”, or the “do this” that every preacher of the gospel has freedom to preach in all its diversity, while avoiding
manipulation or even three, four, or five points that point more to Aristotle than they do to the inscripturated application in a particular Pauline text.

It can be helpful to the preacher today, to consider not only what Paul has written by way of the truth of the Person and Work of Jesus Christ, but to consider how Paul himself applies this truth. This inscripturated and Biblical marriage of the indicative and the imperative will bring great confidence to the preacher of Scripture and will help to avoid manipulation in the application. The people of God with the work of the Holy Spirit in illumination, will be able to concretely understand the ancient text and how this relates to them, the modern people. God is Sovereign not only in his work accomplished in Christ, but also in the application of that work.

Sidney Greidanus has written:

“Concentration on the original message will keep the sermon from being sidetracked by all kinds of ‘practical’ remarks that may be related to elements in the text but have nothing to do with the intended message...Douglas Stuart rightly insists, ‘Unless you are convinced that it is the intention of the Scripture that it be applied in a certain way, no suggestion as to application can be confidently advanced’” (Greidanus, 166).

Greidanus suggests that if the preacher is to be ethical in following the text and the purpose, goal, or application of that text, he can begin by realizing that even though time separates the congregation at Colossae from our congregations, yet there is still one Faithful God and one Covenant People. In understanding the continuity between the congregations, we can truly seek to follow Paul on his preaching and
interpretation, but also in the way he applies these truths. Again, we can rightly focus on the indicative and the imperative in order to preach with purpose the hope in Christ and at the same time apply it in a way consistent with the truths proclaimed.

The need today in our Reformed pulpits is for them to consistently apply the truths of Scripture. We have considered Paul’s indicative and imperative from his letter to the Church at Colossae. As preachers, we can expect and be hopeful of power from the Holy Spirit as we not only preach the truth revealed in Scripture, but to also appreciate in didactic passages, the truth as applied to Christians living in Christ. It is an ethical problem foundationally when either the truth of Scripture (the indicative) or the commands of Scripture (the imperative) are forced, or manipulated in the sermon in order to direct or bind the people of God to do that which the word of God does not command.

We can learn from particularly didactic portions of Paul’s epistles so that we may not only be right in content, but also in form. Again, we seek to apply the truths or indicatives in all the various situations of our congregations, but we seek to find the purpose or goal of the original message to the ancient congregation. In doing that because there is only One Faithful God and one people of God, although the time period is different, the application or the imperatives of God can still be applied to
people who are serving the Living God in Christ. May it be the goal of every preacher of the gospel to consider how he is applying the messages of Scripture. He may ask himself: “Am I applying this indicative in a way consistent with the text? Am I preaching or commanding the congregation in application, only that which the Word of God is revealing in this particular text?” To ask these questions and to seek the purpose of the indicative and imperative working in harmony is to hopefully work toward solving an ethical problem in preaching and sermon application.

There are wedded in Scripture both the indicative and the imperative, what God has joined together, let no preacher rent asunder!

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Bibliography


