

# Set Your Mind on Things Above

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## Colossians 3:1-3 (NRSVUE)

So if 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 the things that are above, not on the things that are on earth, <sup>3</sup>for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

After Jesus ascended, the disciples had to make a choice. They could return to their old lives – the lives they had lived before they met Jesus – fishermen, day laborers, tax collectors, etc. Or they could carry on the work they had begun together, embracing the challenge and the life to which they had been called. The first option was safer. They knew how to be who they used to be. The risks were low. They had been more or less comfortable with the life they had known. But, on the other hand, returning to their old lives might not be so easy. They'd seen so much, experienced so much. They were not the same people they had been before. They had witnessed miracles and been a part of miracles themselves. They had seen people's lives transformed. *Their* lives had been transformed.

And yet, *following Jesus* in his ministry and *leading* that ministry were two different things. Without him, could they keep going? There was no guarantee of success; in fact, their chances of failure were high. The costs would be great. Ministry cost Jesus his life, and it might cost them theirs, too.

Forging ahead would require trust that Jesus would send the power of the Holy Spirit as he said he would. It would take faith – faith in God, faith in Jesus's promise to be with them always, faith in each other, faith in themselves that they could be who God called them to be and who Jesus said they were. It would involve great risk. It would require vulnerability. If they had played it safe, we wouldn't be here today. But because they dared greatly, the power of the Holy Spirit flowed through them. And the world would never be the same.

That same Spirit is among us today, and the power that the Spirit brings can transform the world. It still takes faith to follow Jesus today, to trust that Jesus is who he said he is and who he says we are. It still requires vulnerability to be open to God, to live like Jesus, and to put ourselves out there to change the world and invite others to experience the life he offers.

We've established that vulnerability is hard, yet absolutely necessary for genuine connection and authenticity. God calls us to embrace vulnerability to be who we were made to be. But we go to great lengths to avoid it. We look for vulnerability in others, but we don't want them to see it in us. So we learn to shield ourselves with behaviors and attitudes that protect us from being vulnerable.

This shielding begins in adolescence, when peer pressure and fitting in exert a powerful influence on the formation of our identity. Our shields are still in early development at that stage and are relatively easy to observe. But as we reach adulthood, they become more subtle and are harder for us to put on and take off. Once we have worn this emotional armor long enough, it molds to our shape and becomes almost undetectable.

This morning, we're going to look at three common shields we use and how to set them aside to embrace the vulnerability that helps us to live into God's hope for us.

Foundational to addressing all the shields we use is the core conviction that *we are enough*. Each of us is created in the image of God. We carry the breath of God in us. And God calls us beloved. We don't have to try to do or be something we are not. We are enough *because God says we are*. But the world tries to distort or deny that identity in us, to tell us something is lacking in us, that we need to have more stuff or do something different or be someone else. God wants us to help us break out of the pattern of conforming to that distortion and to transform our lives so that we can live into the fullness of God's hope for us.

The first shield is what Brené Brown calls *foreboding joy*. It is the sense we get that even when things are going well – *especially* when they are going well – something bad is about to happen. We're waiting for the proverbial other shoe to drop. All of us can relate to this feeling in our experience right now. We have been through so much over just the last few years: from COVID to George Floyd to January 6 to October 7 to wars in Ukraine and Iran to rising prices to ICE terrorism to hate crimes to new outbreaks of deadly diseases. Life has been...a lot.

Let's say you have a great day – maybe even today. The weather holds off. Church is good and the sermon isn't too long. You connect with friends and maybe even make some new ones. You get to spend time with your family. You manage to set aside the anxieties and the worries about the world for a bit. You're feeling good. You're happy. Things are going great. But somewhere in the back of your mind is the nagging sense that it can't last, that any minute something bad is going to happen and it will all come crashing down.

That's the way foreboding joy works. Not only do we fear something bad will happen; we expect it. We keep on high alert, fearful of letting our guard down or being too vulnerable. We sometimes manifest foreboding joy in expressions like, "I don't want to set myself up for disappointment." It is as if we're trying to beat the letdown to the punch. The thinking goes that if I'm always expecting the worst, then I won't be so disappointed when it happens.

But far from inoculating us against being let down, this shield actually keeps us from fully experiencing joy. Think about the way you felt as a child playing with bubbles or rolling down a hillside. When is the last time you felt like that? Joy requires vulnerability, the ability to be fully present and in the moment. If we're constantly bracing for disappointment, we're holding ourselves back and robbing ourselves of the chance to experience genuine joy.

We can push back against foreboding joy by practicing gratitude. Appreciate each moment, regardless of what may come later. All we get is *now*, so make the most of it. Both joy and gratitude are spiritual practices grounded in our faith. We know God is with us. We know that *we are enough*. We know that, even when bad times come, we are not alone. God has us.

As a shame researcher, Brown names three lessons about joy and light she has learned from people who spent time in sorrow and darkness: (1) Joy comes from ordinary moments. It isn't the big celebrations and experiences in life that bring us the greatest joy, but the everyday, ordinary moments. We risk missing out on the joy of the ordinary when we're too busy chasing down the extraordinary. (2) Be grateful for what you have. The key to happiness isn't having what you want, but wanting what you have. Count your blessings. Celebrate the little things. And (3) don't squander joy. We can't prepare for tragedy and loss. Things happen. But if we live in a constant state of high alert, we'll miss out on everyday

joy. And a bonus: experiencing joy strengthens our resilience. “Joy becomes a part of who we are, and when bad things happen – and they do happen – we are stronger.”<sup>1</sup>

The second shield is *perfectionism*. Perfectionism isn't the same thing as striving for excellence. We *should* aim high. But perfectionism is the belief that if we do things perfectly and if we *are* perfect, we can avoid the pain of blame, judgment, and shame. Perfectionism is about trying to earn approval and, more importantly, avoid criticism. If we perform flawlessly, we can avoid the vulnerability of facing people's judgment if we make a mistake. But perfectionism isn't the key to success; it actually hinders achievement. An obsession with trying to be perfect correlates with depression, anxiety, addiction, and missed opportunities. Perfectionism doesn't help us avoid shame; it is itself a form of shame.

We respond to perfectionism by remembering that we are enough. We don't have to do anything to earn God's love and favor. God's grace is a gift. It's not conditional on performance or perfection. We can also learn to appreciate the beauty of imperfections. Think about the people you love. Are they perfect? Of course not! It's likely that the things you love most about them are the little flaws that make them real people, just like you.

There is a Japanese art form called *kintsugi*, the ancient practice of repairing broken or cracked ceramics with a mixture of tree sap and dust from precious metals. Rather than concealing the cracks, it accentuates them and renders the pottery even more beautiful than the original. The same thing can be true in us.

Perfect is the enemy of good. When we let go of perfectionism and stop hustling for other people's approval, we learn to embrace our God-given worthiness. Held in the assurance of our “enough-ness,” we are free to embrace God's hope for us and experience genuine transformation.

The third shield is *numbing* – making ourselves numb to vulnerability and the feelings that come with it. This might sound like a description of addiction, and it is. But numbing isn't restricted to addiction to alcohol or controlled substances. It can be anything that keeps us from feeling the things we want to feel less of. A common form of numbing is an obsession with being crazy-busy. “We are a culture of people who have bought into the idea that if we stay busy enough, the truth of our lives won't catch up with us.”<sup>2</sup>

Using alcohol or drugs – prescription or recreational – or food, or social media, whatever it is, even if it doesn't rise to the level of addiction, can be a means of numbing. It isn't so much *what* we do as *why* we do it that becomes an issue. If I have a glass of wine with dinner as a way to enhance my appreciation of the meal, that's one thing. If I have a glass of wine or a couple of drinks to “take the edge off,” that's something else entirely. I may be busy because work or family requires it for a time, but am I chronically overscheduling myself? Why?

We may numb ourselves to vulnerability and the feelings that come with it intentionally or subconsciously. But numbing vulnerability doesn't just deaden the pain of our difficult experiences; it also dulls experiences of love, joy, belonging, creativity, and empathy – the very things that make life worth living. “Numb the dark and you numb the light.”<sup>3</sup>

Brown notes that “Americans today are more debt-ridden, obese, medicated, and addicted than we've ever been. ... We're desperate to feel more or less of something.”<sup>4</sup> At its roots, the desire for numbing comes from shame, anxiety, and disconnection, usually in some combination of the three. We may be anxious about any number of things happening, but that anxiety is compounded when we believe that if we were smarter, faster, stronger, or better, we could handle everything. We might have neighbors, colleagues, a couple hundred friends on Facebook,

and some *bona fide*, real-life friends, yet still feel lonely or unseen. But if shame tells us we're disconnected because we're *unworthy* of connection, the pain may be unbearable.

Rather than responding to our feelings by numbing them, we can lean into our feelings and learn *how* to feel them, especially the discomfort of hard emotions. Be present. Practice mindfulness. Talk about your feelings to people you trust who are able to bear the weight of what you need to share.

Did the disciples wrestle with vulnerability? I'm sure they did. Their pressures were not the same as the personal and societal expectations we wrestle with; their risks were far greater. They faced the hostility of the Roman government, the opposition of temple leaders and other Jewish resistance, the ridicule and scorn of their Gentile neighbors. Yet, they did not remain captive to the pressures of the world around them. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, they set their minds on things above, answering the call to pass on the faith and to build the church.

Friends, we gather on the day and in the spirit of Pentecost. We are not tasked to *birth* the church, but to *be* the church. We are called to grow deeper in faith and pursue God's hope for every life. That starts with pursuing God's hope for *our* lives, too. Live in the joy and the challenge of the Spirit life. Stop trying to earn what can never be earned. Don't hold back the sacred, beloved self that God made you to be. Dare greatly. Risk vulnerability. Embrace the life God wants for you. Set your minds on things above. And as we allow the Spirit to bring about transformation in us, we will see the transformation of the world. Thanks be to God. Amen.



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