

3:1 Seek the Things that are Above

Strive for Perfection.

Origen: But he who keeps the commandments not in perfect love, but in dread of future torment and in fear of punishments is indeed also himself a son of Abraham; he too receives gifts, that is, the reward of his work ... nevertheless he is inferior to that person who is perfected not in slavish fear, but in the freedom of love.... "Leaving the word of the first principles of Christ," ¹ he is borne to perfection. "Seeking the things that are above, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God, not the things that are on the earth," he "looks not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen." ² In the divine Scriptures he does not follow "the letter which kills" but "the spirit which quickens." ³ From those things he will doubtless be one who does not receive "the spirit of bondage again in fear, but the spirit of adoption, whereby they cry, Abba, Father." ⁴ Homilies on Genesis 7.4.⁵

Live on the Heights.

Chrysostom: See the wisdom of our teacher and to what a height he immediately raises those who listen to him. He cut a path through the midst of all the angels, archangels, thrones, dominations, principalities, virtues, all those invisible powers, the cherubim and seraphim and set the thoughts of the faithful right before the very throne of the King. By his teaching he has persuaded those who walk the earth to sever the bonds of the body, to take flight and to stand in spirit by the side of him who is the Lord of all. Baptismal Instructions 7.20.⁶

Look at Heavenly Things.

Aphrahat: Let us think upon the things that are above, on the heavenly things, and meditate on them, where Christ has been lifted up and exalted. But let us forsake the world which is not ours, that we may arrive at the place to which we have been invited. Let us raise up our eyes on high, that we may see the splendor which shall be revealed. Select Demonstrations 6.1.⁷

Isaac of Nineveh: What is the resurrection of the soul, of which the apostle speaks, saying, "If then you have been raised with Christ"? When the apostle said, "God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, has shined into our hearts," ⁸ he showed this resurrection to be the exodus from the old state which in the likeness of Sheol incarcerates a man so that the light of the gospel will not shine mystically upon him. This is a breath of life through hope in the resurrection, and by it the dawning of divine wisdom shines in his heart, so that a man should become new, having nothing of the old man. Then the image of

Christ is formed in us through the Spirit of wisdom and revelation of the knowledge of him. Ascetical Homilies 37.9

Inward Renewal.

Augustine: Because the inner man, too, if he is certainly renewed from day to day, ¹⁰ is surely old before he is renewed. For that is done inwardly, which the same apostle says: “Put off the old man and put on the new man.” And he offers an explanation of this in the words that follow: “Wherefore putting away lying, speak the truth.” ¹¹ But where is lying put away, except inwardly, in order that he may dwell in the holy mountain of God who speaks the truth in his heart. ¹² ... And the words of the apostle are in keeping with this mystery [i.e., of inner resurrection]: “But if you have risen with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God; mind the things that are above.” On the Trinity 4.3.6.¹³

3:2 Set Your Mind on Things that are Above

The Baptismal Charge.

Chrysostom: It was not idly or without purpose that I anticipated the event and instructed your loving assembly in all these matters, but I did so that you might be carried on by the wings of hope and enjoy the pleasure before you enjoyed the actual benefit. I did it, too, that you might adopt a purpose worthy of the rite, and as blessed Paul has exhorted, you might “mind the things that are above” and change your thoughts from earth to heaven, from visible things to those that are unseen. And we see the objects of bodily sight more clearly with the eyes of the spirit. Baptismal Instructions 2.28.¹⁴

Put Reason in Charge.

Gregory of Nyssa: So ... if reason instead assumes sway over such emotions, each of them is transmuted to a form of virtue. For anger produces courage, terror caution, fear obedience, hatred aversion from vice, the power of love the desire for what is truly beautiful. High spirit in our character raises our thought above the passions and keeps it from bondage to what is base. Indeed, even the great apostle praises such a form of mental elevation when he bids us constantly to “think those things that are above.” So we find that every such motion, when elevated by loftiness of mind, is conformed to the beauty of the divine image. On the Making of Man 18.5.¹⁵

3:3 Your Life is Hid with Christ in God

A Sobering Reminder.

Chrysostom: This is to prepare the way for drawing them off from pleasure and ease ... so that, now, you do not appear. See how Paul has transferred them into heaven itself. For, as I said, he is always bent on showing that they have the very same things that Christ has. Through all his epistles the tenor is this, to show that in all things they are partakers with him. Therefore, he uses the terms head and body and does everything to convey this to them. Homilies on Colossians 7.18

Severian of Gabala: Our life is hidden until the blessing of eternal life shall be revealed to all, when the glory of Christ shall appear in his second coming. Pauline Commentary from the Greek Church.19

Between Heaven and Earth.

Ambrose: We should be aware of the fact, therefore, that where God has planted the tree of life he has also planted a tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the midst of paradise. It is understood that he planted it in the middle. Therefore, in the middle of paradise there was both a tree of life and a cause for death. Keep in mind that man did not create life. By carrying out and observing the precepts of God it was possible for man to find life. This was the life mentioned by the apostle: "Your life is hidden with Christ in God." Man, therefore, was, figuratively speaking, either in the shadow of life—because our life on earth is but a shadow—or man had life, as it were, in pledge, for he had been breathed on by God. Paradise 29.20

Ambrose: For this is the meaning of flight: to know your goal, to unburden oneself of the world, to unburden oneself of the body.... This is the meaning of flight from here—to die to the elements of this world, to hide one's life in God, to turn aside from corruptions, not to defile oneself with the objects of desire and to be ignorant of the things of this world. Flight from the World 7.38.21

To Be Hidden Is to Love Truly.

Augustine: For when God will be all in all, then nothing will be lacking to their desire. 22 Such an end does not have an end. There no one dies, where no one comes unless he should die to this world, not by the death of all in which the body is abandoned by the soul but by the death of the elect in which, even when one still remains in mortal flesh, the heart is set on high. About this kind of death the apostle said, "For you are dead, and your life is hidden with Christ in God." Perhaps about this it was said, "Strong as death is love." 23 For by this love it comes to pass that, dwelling in this still corruptible body, we die to this world

and our life is hidden with Christ in God, nay rather, love itself is our death to the world and our life with God. Tractates on John 65.1.24

3:4 *You Will Appear with Him*

Solid Encouragement.

Augustine: But what did he go on to say? “When Christ appears, your life, then you also will appear with him in glory.” So now is the time for groaning, then it will be for rejoicing; now for desiring, then for embracing. What we desire now is not present; but let us not falter in desire; let long, continuous desire be our daily exercise, because the one who made the promise doesn’t cheat us. Sermons 350a.4.25

3:5a *Put to Death What is Earthly in You*

Postbaptismal Sin.

Chrysostom: Does Paul write as though these things were in us? There is no contradiction. It is similar to one who has scoured a statue that was filthy, recast it, and displayed it new and bright, explaining that the rust was eaten off and destroyed. Yet he recommends diligence in clearing away the future rust. He does not contradict himself, for it is not that rust which he scoured off that he recommends should be cleared away but that which grew afterwards. So it is not that former putting to death he speaks of here, nor those fornications, but those which afterward grow. Homilies on Colossians 8.26

The Practice of Virtue.

Athanasius: But the saints, and they who truly practice virtue, “mortify their members” and as the result of this, are pure and without spot, confiding in the promise of our Savior, who said, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”²⁷ These, having become dead to the world, who have renounced the merchandise of the world, gain an honorable death. Festal Letters 7.3.28

Sinful Desire Still Present in the Baptized.

Augustine: Thus, in movements according to the spirit, the soul sometimes opposes other movements of itself according to the flesh. Conversely, in movements according to the flesh, it opposes others which it has according to the spirit, and this is why we say the flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit lusts against the flesh. But this is also why “it is being renewed day by day,”²⁹ for the soul does not fail to make

progress in virtue as it gradually diminishes the carnal desires to which it does not consent. It is to those already baptized that the apostle says, "Mortify your members, which are on the earth." Against Julian 6.14.41.30

3:5b *Covetousness is Idolatry*

All Sin Is Idolatry.

Jerome: In a general way all that is of the devil is characterized by hatred for God. What is of the devil is idolatry, since all idols are subject to him. Yet Paul elsewhere lays down the law in express terms, saying: "Mortify your members." Idolatry is not confined to casting incense upon an altar with finger and thumb or to pouring libations of wine out of a cup into a bowl. Letters 14.5.31

3:9–10 *Put Off the Old Nature, Put on the New Nature*

Moral Choice, Not Physical Substance.

Chrysostom: Moral choice rather than human nature is the determining factor and rather constitutes "the human condition" than the natural determinants. For human nature itself does not cast one into hell, nor does it lead one into the kingdom, but this happens by men themselves. We neither love nor hate anyone so far as he is man, but so far as he is such or such a man. If then our real essence as human beings is the body, which in any case cannot be accountable, how can one say that the body is evil? But what does Paul say? "With his doings." He means freedom of choice, with its accompanying acts. Homilies on Colossians 8.32

Stripping Off the Old.

Basil the Great: Seek nothing with exterior gold and bodily adornment; but consider the garment as one worthy to adorn him who is according to the image of his Creator, as the apostle says: "Stripping off the old man, and putting on the new, one that is being renewed unto perfect knowledge 'according to the image of his Creator.'" And he who has put on "the heart of mercy, kindness, humility, patience and meekness" is clothed within and has adorned the inner man. Homilies 17.11.33

Reclaim the Image.

Ambrose: Therefore, as upon the cross it was not the fullness of the Godhead but our weakness that was brought into subjection, so also will the Son hereafter become subject to the Father in his participation in our nature. This is so that when the lusts of the flesh are brought into subjection the heart may have no concern for riches or ambition or pleasures. The intention is that God may be all to us, if we live after his image and likeness, as far as we can attain to it, through all. The benefit has passed, then, from the individual to the community; for in his flesh he has tamed the nature of all human flesh.... Therefore, “laying aside all these,” that is those things we read of: “anger, malice, blasphemy, filthy communication”; as he also says below: “Let us, having put off the old man with his deeds, put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him.” *Of the Christian Faith* 5.14.175–76.³⁴

Restore the Creation.

Gregory of Nyssa: And even so we say that the true and perfect soul is the human soul, as is clear from the very nature of its operations in both sensory power and intellect. Anything else that shares in life, because it possesses the power of growth, we call animate by a sort of customary misuse of language, because in these cases the soul does not exist in a perfect condition.... Thus Paul, advising those who were able to hear him to lay hold on perfection, indicates also the mode in which they may attain that object. He tells them that they must “put off the old man” and put on the man “which is renewed after the image of him that created him.” Now may we all return to that divine grace in which God at the first created man, when he said, “Let us make man in our image and likeness.”³⁵ *On the Making of Man* 30.33–34.³⁶

In the Mind, the Inner Person.

Augustine: The renewal and reforming of the mind takes place “after God,” or “after God’s image”: it is said to be “after God,” to exclude one thinking it to be after some other creature; and “after God’s image,” to make it plain that the renewal is effected in the place where God’s image is, that is, in the mind. *On the Trinity* 14.16.22.³⁷

3:11 *Christ is All and in All*

The Final Perfection.

Gregory of Nazianzus: But God will be all in all³⁸ in the time of restitution; not in the sense that the Father alone will be, and the Son be wholly resolved into him, like a torch into a great pyre, from which it was

pulled away for a short time and then put back ... when we shall be no longer divided (as we are now by movements and passions) and containing nothing at all of God, or very little, but then we shall be entirely like God, ready to receive into our hearts the whole God and him alone. This is the perfection to which we press on. Paul himself indeed bears witness to this. Orations 30.6.³⁹

3:14 Love Binds Everything in Perfect Harmony

Without Love, Nothing Is Possible.

Chrysostom: Now what Paul wishes to say is that there is no benefit in those things, for all those things fall apart, unless they are done with love. This is the love that binds them all together. Whatever good thing it is that you mention, if love be absent, it is nothing, it melts away. The analogy is like a ship; though its rigging be large, yet if it lacks girding ropes, it is of no service. Or it is similar to a house; if there are no tie beams, of what use is the house? Think of a body. Though its bones be large, if it lacks ligaments, the bones cannot support the body. In the same way, whatever good our deeds possess will vanish completely if they lack love. Homilies on Colossians 8.⁴⁰

Severian of Gabala: When love does not lead, there is no completion of what is lacking; but, where love is present we abstain from doing evil to one another. Indeed we put our minds in the service of doing good, when we love one another. Pauline Commentary from the Greek Church.⁴¹

3:16 Teach and Admonish One Another

The Christian Sage.

Chrysostom: Nothing is wiser than the person who lives virtuously. Observe how wise he is, says one. He gives what he owns, he is compassionate, and he is loving to all. He has understood well that he shares a common human nature with others. He has thought through how to use his wealth wisely. He realizes the position of wealth makes him no one special. He knows that the bodies of his relatives are more valuable than his wealth. The one who despises glory is wholly wise, for he understands human affairs. This is genuine philosophy, the knowledge of things divine and human. So then he comprehends what things are divine and what are human. From the one he keeps himself, and to the other he devotes his labors. And he also knows how to thank God in all things. He considers the present life as nothing; therefore he is neither delighted with prosperity nor grieved with the opposite condition. Homilies on Colossians 9.⁴³

3:17 *Giving Thanks to God the Father*

Nothing Unclean.

Chrysostom: For if we act this way, there will be nothing polluted, nothing unclean, wherever Christ is called on. If you eat, if you drink, if you marry, if you travel, do all in the name of God, that is, calling him to help you: in everything first pray, then conduct your business. Homilies on Colossians 9.44