

The Supremacy of Christ: Put your Mind where your Faith is (2)

Colossians 3:5-11

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~Since you're a Christian you must kill your outward and inward sinful tendencies and clothe yourself with Christ~

Puritan preacher John Owen once said "Be killing sin, or sin will be killing you."

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Today we are continuing our series through the book of Colossians, and if you have your Bibles please open them to chapter 3. If you didn't bring your own you will find one in the pew in front of you, and Colossians 3 is on page 834. Please follow along.

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For the last two Sundays we have been in what you could call part two of this letter. After laying out the theology Paul wanted his readers, including us, to grapple with, he now shifts his attention to what it looks like to live this out.

So first, because Christ is supreme over everything in creation and over all religious truth, and second, because the mystery of God is that Christ now lives in us. And third, because significant threats exist; threats like the alluring promise of pluralism from outside the church as well as selfishness and bullying from unintentional enemies inside the church. Therefore, those of us who have died and been raised with Christ must become what we already are. That's the progression from theology to praxis.

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So today in verses 5 through 11, Paul continues to lay out what it looks like for someone to become what they already are – to live as Christians. He argues: **Since you're a Christian you must kill your personal and interpersonal sinful tendencies and clothe yourself with Christ.**

Would you pray with me?

[Pray]

Now before I get into preaching this text I want to start with a little teaching on the structure of this paragraph and the importance of context because it's particularly relevant here. There are three parallel sections to this paragraph:

So first, verse 5 starts with the words "**Put to death**, whatever belongs to your earthly nature." And then there is a list of five vices: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed. And at the end of this list Paul expands on the last item saying greed "is idolatry" and the cause of God's coming wrath.

Now look down at verse 8. The second section starts with the words “But now you must also *rid yourselves* of all such things.” And this is parallel to verse 5’s “put these things to death”. And he gives us another list of five vices: Anger, rage, malice, slander and filthy language. And then he briefly extrapolates on filthy language saying: “don’t lie to each other.”

Then in verse 10 Paul gives us the same structure a third time, but now with a positive tweak. Instead of vices to avoid, here we are called to “put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.” This is the opposite of put to death or rid yourselves.

And then Paul gives us five pictures of how this new self is different from anything we have experienced before. So he says in it “there is no Jew or Gentile – that’s one picture. There’s no circumcised or uncircumcised – that’s the second picture. No barbarian, No Scythian, and No Slave or Free.” Five pictures to parallel the five vices in the first two lists. And like before Paul ends with a brief extrapolation at the bottom of verse 11 where he says “but Christ is all, and is in all.” That’s the structure.

Now what you should take away from this is that Paul was an incredibly intentional writer. He’s not just firing off an email here. He has thought through and planned out exactly what he wants to say because this is important. So let’s start by unpacking the first part of verse 5.

[Read Colossians 3:5a]

Since you are a Christian...

Now this is the way our big idea started last week, and that’s not a mistake because Paul is intentionally linking this section to what has come before.

The first link is the word “therefore.” And whenever you see a “therefore” in the text you need to ask what it’s there for. The idea is that this word always ties what you are about to read with what has come before. So that means verses 1-4 are referenced here and it means chapters 1 and 2 are referenced here.

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Now all of this might sound just a bit boring like what is the point of digging out the grammar and sentence structure of Paul’s letter. But it is incredibly important because it is the context of these words that gives them their meaning. Without context you can make these words say whatever you want. And that’s always the way it is with language.

For example when I was a kid one of our neighbours put up a sign at the end of their driveway that said “Slow – kids – playing – thanks.” Now the context was that this was a sign at the end of a driveway, and so everyone knew what it meant. But there was no punctuation in the sign and so one

of my favorite games to play with my sister was to try to think of a different way to read it every time we drove by. And so for example we tried to imagine what it would look like to see a bunch of slow kids playing a game of thanks.

Now we were deliberately trying to take that sign out of context, but we can do this unintentionally with the Bible. You see most people open the Bible like a magic book. They find a couple verses, read them and expect their life to be better because of it. But when we do that we take the Bible out of context and end up making those verses say whatever we want them to say, just like the sign on the driveway.

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One example from scripture: Many people use Jeremiah 29:11 as a promise to hold on to for themselves and a blessing for others. It reads:

For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. (Jeremiah 29:11)

Now by itself this sounds like God has plans to take you from whatever situation you might find yourself in and make it better – that's what it sounds like right? But these words aren't a promise for all people to hold on to. Imagine you said this to someone and the next day they found out they had cancer or the bank was calling their mortgage. They would think the Bible was a lie, but really you had just taken this verse out of context.

There are verses in the Bible that are promises for everyone. For example Romans says:

If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. (Romans 10:9)

That message is for people of all time. But the passage in Jeremiah was spoken to the Israelites in Babylon. God was telling them don't try to leave Babylon, stay in your captivity and I will bless you there. So if you give that verse to someone you are telling them "stay in your slavery and God will bless you." Probably not what you mean!

And this brings us to the second link to what has come before in verse 5: "put to death."

Now if you are just joining us today you might have some pre-conceived ideas about what it means to put to death your earthly nature, or you might have no idea at all. But Paul has already used this picture several times in Colossians, and we have to look to those passages for the meaning.

So last week we read:

Since, then, you have been **raised** with Christ, set your hearts on things above.... For you **died**, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. (Colossians 3:1;3)

This is the same death language that Paul is using in our text today. And last week we saw that this pointed even further back to chapter two where Paul said: In [Christ] you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands... having been **buried** with Him in **baptism**, in which you were also **raised** with Him, **through your faith** in the working of God (Colossians 2:11-12)

Again death and resurrection language but here tied to baptism and your faith. Friends we can't read our text today correctly without talking about baptism. Putting our earthly nature to death and baptism are the same in Paul's mind.

Paul says when are physically and publicly baptized, something happens. Not only do we declare to our church family that we have put our faith in Jesus, but we actually join Jesus in death to sin and resurrection to new life.

As we go down into the water we die to our old way of living, we die to the "old man" as Paul calls him elsewhere, the part of us that is ruled by sin. And then as we come up out of the water we rise again to a new reality and a new identity.¹

Baptism is the physical acting out of your faith in Christ.

So if you are here today and you haven't been baptized, I urge you stop trying to live in your own strength – stop trying to live a life that honours God while still keeping your old self alive. Instead, in obedience to Christ, and in hope of becoming a new person, die to your old self and become who you were created to be.

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And so if you would like to be baptized come and talk with me after the service. We have a short class that unpacks this in more depth, and then I would love to lead you through this life changing moment of death and resurrection.

But maybe you're not convinced; maybe you still have questions that you'd like to work through. I would love to help you do that. Come talk to me.

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Just one other carefully spoken word on this. I know that there are people here who come from traditions where infant baptism is practiced. And I don't say this to be insensitive to you, and I don't say this because I think these traditions aren't Christian – I know they are. But I would be remiss if I didn't encourage you to look at the text. It is the Bible, not human tradition that is most important.

¹ See also Romans 6:1-7

So notice that the baptism Paul talks about happens when you are buried and raised with Jesus through your faith in the working of God. That's what Colossians 2:11 and 12 say. The baptism Paul describes is believers baptism.

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If you are interested in unpacking this further please come and talk with me.

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Alright, the ultimate point of the context is this: everything in chapter 3 and 4 is directed to Christians - people who have died and been resurrected with Christ through baptism. And it is to these people that Paul says "since you're a Christian, you must put to death whatever belongs to your earthly nature."

And then he gives us some examples of what this looks like. Look again at vs 5:

[Read Colossians 3:5-7]

Since you're a Christian you must kill your personal sinful tendencies...

Now there is one general truth and one specific truth here that I want to draw out of these words. First the general truth:

With the words "Put to death" Paul is calling Christians to become what we already are. Christians are already those who have died to our old selves in the waters of baptism, and yet Paul says we still have to put something to death.

Now how does that make sense? I mean if we already are something – if we are new creations,² raised with Christ to new life, what remains to become? Right?

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Paul would say "Nothing... and everything." Yes, once we've gone through the waters of baptism we are new creations – that's our identity and there is nothing more. But our new identity does not automatically play out in our actions, we must train it in every way.

And this is certainly the experience I've had. After coming to Christ and being baptized I have still had any temptations and problems with sin. In fact I've already told you of years of struggling against pornography and lust – temptations that did not go away after baptism. And I suspect those of you who have been baptized have a similar story – you're not perfect yet are you?

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In fact if you think you are that's a problem because the Apostle John, speaking to Christians said:

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. (1 John 1:8)

² 2 Corinthians 5:17 "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."

So sin, and our sinful nature doesn't just go away when we come to Christ. Instead what happens that we have the ability to put that nature to death.

Prior to our death and resurrection with Christ the Bible says we were slaves to sin.³ And as slaves we literally had to sin – we had no choice. But after salvation our bondage to sin was broken – we have a choice. Now we can cooperate with the transformative power operative in us. But it takes effort.

Friends, our new identity makes it possible for us to honour God, but it doesn't make us honour God. We still have to work out our salvation.⁴ And Paul says the way we do this is by putting our earthly nature to death.

And here is where we get to the specific truth in these verses, the five examples of sin Paul tells us to put to death. He starts with sexual immorality. This is a general way of talking about any kind of sexual sin. And so Paul says since you are a Christian, put this sin to death.

Second he mentions impurity, or uncleanness. This is any kind of moral corruption – but it usually refers to sexual sin. Paul says stop doing things God says are corrupt.

Then he mentions lust which is looking at someone other than your spouse with sexual desire. It's sin Paul says; put it to death.

Then he says put evil desires to death – this one is a little tricky to interpret, but the best we can guess it refers to a basic tendency towards sin. If you find yourself drawn to a particular sin, work to put that tendency to death.

And finally he mentions greed or covetousness – this is an inappropriate desire for more than you have. And Paul expands on this one saying that this is idolatry or the serving of another God. When we look to anything besides God for safety or fulfillment or happiness we find ourselves worshipping an idol. And Paul says, put this tendency to death.

Now this isn't an exhaustive list by any stretch of the imagination, and it isn't intended to be, rather it is a descriptive list of a specific kind of sin – all five of these sins are personal or moral sins.

Now you probably picked up that there is a strong sexual theme here. While sexual sin isn't the only kind of sin, or a "worse" kind of sin than any other, it is a sin we commit inside ourselves.

This is why in Corinthians we read:

³ Romans 6:20 (See also sermon "Put your Mind where your Faith is (1)" (Mar 15, 2015)

⁴ Philippians 2:12

Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body. Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit... Therefore honor God with your bodies. (1 Corinthians 6:18-20)

Now don't read this as saying sex is bad. The church has, in the past, given that impression and it's wrong. Sex is God's gift meant to bring a husband and wife together in marriage. But deviance from God's intentions comes from our old nature. Now that we have a new nature, we must honour God with our sexuality.

Friends, sex is for marriage. And inside that context the Bible says "knock yourself out." But outside that context sex is sin. And that's because sex is designed to make two people one flesh. And if you are a Christian your flesh is the temple of the Holy Spirit. And temples should be pure places of worship.

But the best sex can be outside of marriage is two people using each other to selfishly pleasure themselves without committing to love each other. That leads to broken temples. And it is sin to break God's temple.

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And Paul says because of sins like these God's wrath is coming.

Now nobody likes the wrath of God. It's not popular these days. We would rather focus on His being a God of love and forgiveness – which He is. But God is also a God of justice and punishment. He is holy so He must punish sin – if He didn't then He wouldn't be good.

Now God's wrath isn't volatile or unpredictable like ours is. It is always appropriate and expected. Sin always brings God's just wrath upon us. And so Paul says, speaking to Christians, if you persist in these sins you will incur the wrath of God.

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Now if at this point you are feeling condemned there is good news. Jesus came to save sinners. He came to rescue us from the wrath of God. But in order to be rescued we need to realize we are in danger. And so Jesus came to tell the world things are not okay – you aren't fine. And without hearing this bad news you can't receive the good news that Jesus wants to absorb God's wrath against you. He wants to be your substitute and die in your place.

And if you are a Christian, Paul says, Jesus has died to absorb that wrath, so if you don't want to bring it back upon yourself you need to kill your personal tendencies towards sin. Friends, take this seriously.

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Now here is where we get to the second list. Look at verse 8:

[Read Colossians 3:8-9]

Since you're a Christian you must kill your personal and interpersonal sinful tendencies...

We aren't going to get into this too deeply, but while the first list dealt with personal sins this second list deals with community sins. Now that we are dead to the world and raised with Christ not only our private behaviour is affected, but the way we relate to each other is also affected. Christians put away interpersonal sinful tendencies.

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Friends, it is so easy within churches to find problems in each other and become unnecessarily critical – have you ever been part of a church like that? Our focus can so quickly shift from being heavenly minded, from focusing on our vertical relationship with Christ and get stuck on the horizontal, on the details of things that happen here and the problems we see in each other.

And when this happens we start tearing down the community instead of building it up. And Paul says since you're a Christian and you've died to your old self, get rid of this kind of talk – put it to death.

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Now if you've had a problem with negativity, and that negativity has shown up in the way you talk about things or people here, this isn't going to stop over night. Just like our personal sins don't disappear after baptism these sins require effort to overcome. And since you're a Christian you must work to put them to death.

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Now we are near the end here and there is a question that perhaps is burning in your mind. What do I do if I find myself trapped in one of these lists? What do I do if I'm a Christian but I've still got a problem with either personal sins or interpersonal, community destroying, sins? What do I do?

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The answer is in the final section that begins in verse 10.

[Read Colossians 3:10-11]

Since you're a Christian you must kill your personal and interpersonal sinful tendencies and clothe yourself with Christ.

Last week the emphasis was on putting our minds where our faith is by setting our minds on the things above. And here Paul continues that theme as the answer to the difficulty of putting our lingering earthly natures to death.

And the answer is reorient yourself. Not only do we need to kill those earthly tendencies that don't line up with our new identity, but we need to clothe ourselves with something new.

Paul says “put on the new self.” That means it doesn’t happen by accident. This too takes effort, this too is a process. Paul says this new self is “being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator” but you need to put it on, and keep putting it on, in order to experience its reward – in order for you to image Jesus.

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Now this isn’t works salvation. In order to image your Creator you must be a new creation, and that happens when by grace you are buried and raised with Jesus in faith. But salvation doesn’t end there, Paul says after this you must work to set your mind on the things above, you must put on Christ.

And then he describes what a community that has done this looks like. And primarily we see it is a place where all the polarities of the world are overcome.⁵ Where social status and race and gender and age are totally irrelevant and where everyone serves each other like Christ served the church.

Can you imagine a community like that? Can you imagine a church like that? Do you want to be a church like that?

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Now don’t let yourself think this is some ideal that we have to wait for heaven to experience. Paul writes this as a command for Christians right now. Since you’re a Christian clothe yourself with Christ! And when this happens among a group of Christians – when Christ becomes all, and is in all, people like us taste heaven on earth.

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Friends, I want that, and I know many of you want that as well. So let’s pursue it. Many of us are people who have died to our old self and been raised with Jesus to new life. And because that is true we can put to death what is earthly within ourselves; we can kill our personal and our interpersonal tendencies to sin. And we can clothe ourselves in Christ.

And when Christ is what we care about and in all we do then we will find ourselves experiencing heaven right here at Fort George. Friends, set your minds on that. Don’t focus on the horizontal problems here, instead put on your new self, and, as John Owen said “be killing sin, or sin will be killing you.

⁵ For a similar text linking baptism, clothing ourselves in Christ, and becoming part of a “polarityless” community see Galatians 3:26-28