

**Colossians: The Supremacy of Christ
Called to be Holy
Colossians 3:5-11**

There is a classic line at the end of Ernest Hemingway's novel *The Sun Also Rises* that resonates with most, I think. The novel follows a group of American and British expatriates who gather in the mid-1920's Paris and go to Pamplona, Spain for the running of the bulls. The promiscuous lifestyle that all celebrated left them jealous and empty and bitter. The two main characters, Jake and a woman named Brett, were in and out of relationship. At the very end of the book, they were in a taxi together when Brett said, "Oh, Jake – we could have had such a good time together." Jake responded, with the last words of the novel, "Yes. Isn't it pretty to think so."

While I am not recommending that you read *The Sun Also Rises* – read *The Old Man and the Sea* if you want to read Hemingway – even so, many will resonate with the cynical response of one who had hoped for so much more in life than he was able to realize. Life without Christ always disappoints.

In Christ, however, life is always good, right? Because of our union with Christ, we are always in control of our own passions, so we do not face the self-recrimination and disillusionment that unbelievers are forced to admit. When life is beyond our control, we trust the one who set the stars in place, right? Or, is it so that when you are told that you have the power to live a life above temptation and beyond circumstances, much to your surprise you find that is *not* your reality? Are you tempted to say along with unbelieving Jake, "Yes – isn't it pretty to think so? Isn't it pretty to think I will be able to control my need to control, or overcome my anger or lust, or my laziness and bitterness?"

Does the blessing of union with Christ truly break the power of sin in the life of a believer? If so, does a struggle with sin indicate the absence of union with Christ in his or her life? If there has been a pattern of failure in the believer's life, what hope is there for behavioral changes that glorify the Lord? Colossians 3:1-17, understood within the wider context of biblical truth, addresses all these questions, though not as directly as we may desire. Since we have three weeks to examine these 17 verses, perhaps we can move in the direction of godliness over failure and cynicism. Today's text, Colossians 3:5-11, is the middle section of the larger passage we are studying. After the Scripture is read, I will work through the text, defining the terms and considering what the Apostle Paul was seeking to communicate to his readers, and then see what application there is for us. I will read Colossians 3:1-17, though we will focus primarily on verses 5-11. It is our custom to stand as God's Word is being read, so if you will, please stand.

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

5 Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. 6 On account of these the wrath of God is coming. 7 In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. 8 But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. 9 Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices 10 and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. 11 Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

12 Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, 13 bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. 14 And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. 15 And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. 17 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.

There is very little that will grab one's attention like the words, "Today, we are going to talk about sex." Why? We are sexual beings and physical intimacy within a biblically ordained marriage of a man and a woman is one of God's finest gifts to us. Conversely, sexual relations and attention outside of such relationships can create some of the most negative consequences we will endure in this life. When Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:18, "Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body," we may not understand the full implications of his warning, but we get it that sexual sins are in a category all their own. Is sexual sin worse than murder? Of course not! But, not many of you are likely to be guilty of murder in your life. Every one of you is susceptible to sexual sins. "Not me!" you may say, but as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:12, "Let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall." That is a good word for us in all temptation, not just in the arena of lust.

In Colossians 3:5, Paul begins by saying, “Tame the tendency within you toward sexual immorality.” No – that is not what he says. “Put to death the impulses that belong to your fleshly nature.” In other words, do not mess around with the list I am about to give you. “Sexual immorality” comes from the Greek word *porneia*, which designates any sexual relations outside of marriage, or, to be more precise, any sexual intercourse outside of marriage. We will be thinking about God’s design for marriage and family and covenant community off and on over the next few months. For now, think about how odd this command must have seemed in the first century. “No sex outside of marriage?” I think we would all agree that it sounds strange today, but in response to those who say that we cling to an antiquated moral standard, I can assure you that this command seemed just as strange in the first century as it does today. John the Baptist lost his head for speaking against an illicit marriage that was surely as much about illicit sex as not. Not long ago, Christian teaching had so impacted the culture that such prohibitions did not seem strange. Men and women still committed adultery, but everyone knew it was wrong. Now, some think of the belief that sexual relations must be confined to marriage is cruel and uncaring. I will remind you of what you already know – it will not be easy in the coming years to take your stand on biblical truth for a sexual ethic.

The list that follows the command against sexual immorality supports the initial forbidden activity. “Impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness,” are almost certainly mentioned in the same vein. They deal with thoughts and actions that do not quite rise to the level of *porneia*. Certainly, pornography would fit in this list as would thoughts that continually move toward the immoral. This is difficult, not only because of the culture, but also because of the way we are wired. The next time you go to an animated children’s movie with your children or grandchildren, notice the scenes that get the biggest laughs, such as a male being hit in a

strategic area or a female shaking her body. When a story comes on TV about sex, most will perk up. We are just wired that way, maybe because sex is such a beautiful gift from God that Satan has perverted. What are we to do with our sinful inclinations? Put them to death. Why? Wrath is coming against those who pervert God's ways and who make an idol of that which is the height of purity in God's design for us.

I am going to move quickly through the rest of the passage so that we can get to application. Verse 7:

7 In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. 8 But now you must put them all away.

It is unlikely that Paul would have included the lists that he does here and in several other NT books if his readers were not prone to struggle with them. The point is, "This is how you lived before Jesus saved you. Why are you still living this way? Put these things to death!" Verse 8:

8 But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth.

John Woodhouse, in his commentary on Colossians, does a good job explaining these terms. "Anger" comes from the same Greek word that is translated "wrath" earlier, as in "The wrath of God is coming." Be careful about your harsh judgments of others in a politically charged age. The order here would be better translated "Wrath, anger." Believers do not have the right to be angry with whomever they want. We are called to be gentle – we are called to be holy. "Malice" is speech that expresses ill will toward others. Perhaps you have recently said something about President Trump or Hillary Clinton that would rise to this level? "Slander" is speech with the intent of damaging another's reputation. "Obscene talk" is

disgraceful speech that is often a result of anger. There is enough vitriolic speech coming out of Washington and around the country that we don't need to add to it. You belong to Jesus before you belong to a political party or to a group that seeks to bring change in the environment or to lower taxes or whatever. Watch your speech.

**When you think about it, when Christians avoid such language, it is no less strange to the world than our strict sexual ethic is. Exercising the privilege that is ours to use our language to build up rather than tear down will almost certainly result in the opportunity to point to the beauty of the gospel for those who have no hope beyond making this world a slightly better place, which is always temporary, at best.
Verse 9:**

9 Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices 10 and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.

**We will talk more about honesty in a few moments, but think how important it is as it relates to our holiness. We have put off the old and put on the new, just like taking off old clothes and putting on new clothes. We are being transformed from a creature of the culture into the image of God, who created us to reflect him and bring glory to him. Perhaps that is why Paul says what he does in verse 11 as he is transitioning to talk about body life in verses 12-17.
Verse 11:**

11 Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

Is it not true that often you are shaped by the expectations of those who belong to your race or your class or your social group? You get your street cred or your bone fides by living and joking and

speaking the same way your group does. But, Paul says, your primary identity is in Christ. You are still a slave or a slave owner, a Greek or a Jew, a barbarian or a Scythian, but you are first and foremost in union with Christ. Thank God, none of you are slaves or slave owners, but you are employers and employees. And, if you belong to Jesus, you are united with him, and he is all, and in all. Verse 11 is a segue to the importance of the church family in your personal walk with Jesus, which we will explore next Sunday.

So, with this brief exposition of our text, let's think about our lives as believers in light of the commands given to God's people, beginning with:

- 1. The cognitive dissonance of our union with Christ and who we are in real life can be maddening**

Believing one way and behaving another way creates cognitive dissonance, or psychological discomfort. Most of us cannot exist in that place for a long time, although some today are giving it a go. Either we will change our behavior to bring it into line with our beliefs or we will change our beliefs to accommodate our behavior. This can be quite difficult for believers, though, because although we are in Christ, Adam continues to live in us and make his presence known on a regular basis. Although our union is with Christ, we still have the sinful nature to contend with in a world full of temptation. Like Paul in Romans 7, we find ourselves unable to do the things for the Lord that we desire. Even worse, the sinful things we hate, deep down, are the very things we find ourselves doing! No wonder Paul said at the end of Romans 7, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?"

When you read lists like the ones in Colossians 3, if you struggle with these types of sins you may wonder if you are, indeed, a Christian, especially with what you so often hear. Soren

Kierkegaard once said, “As you have lived, so have you believed.” What are you to think if you struggle with sexual sins, which can be, as we have already acknowledged, debilitating to marriages, to families, to companies, to churches and can drive professing believers nearly mad? Is there hope? Yes – consider Paul’s next words in Romans 7: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.”

The next four points of application relate to all sin, but particularly to overcoming temptations to sexual sins. The second point:

2. Honesty before the Lord and the body of Christ is a crucial ingredient in the sanctification process

“Do not lie to one another,” Paul says. Lying is one of the very first sins we consciously commit as children. We are good at lying, unless we are OCD about the truth. Even then, we usually want to present the best about ourselves to others, and that includes covering up the ugly side. There is wisdom in not putting all your dirty laundry out for the world to see, and whenever possible, if a person sins, the ring of confession should be kept as small as possible, but it is nearly impossible to overcome a tendency toward immorality or an addiction to pornography on your own. While I am not a fan of forced accountability, or, large group confession outside of church discipline, I am very much a fan of individual or small group accountability with people you trust. In fact, especially for young men, I imagine it is almost impossible to remain pure without help from others. Unfortunately, pornography use is growing among young women, as well. And, temptation may be tempered, with age, but it does not go away. Furthermore, while we struggle in different ways, women may be as guilty of these sins as men without realizing it. When you are watching Netflix and you are thrilled that an unmarried couple finally consummates their relationship with one

another, you are indulging the sins that are listed in Colossians 3. We know there is hope in the Lord, but what word is there for us when we have tried so hard and failed? That is the focus of our next point:

3. Sins of the flesh must be put to death, not put away

I read about a little boy who was in the pantry with the lid off the cookie jar. His mom called out, “Nathan, where are you and what are you doing?” He answered, “I am in the pantry, fighting temptation!” I am afraid that too many of us are in the pantry, fighting temptation, when we should have kept the door closed, and if it had been opened, we certainly should have stayed away from the cookie jar.

What are you doing to protect yourself from temptation? I could give all kinds of examples, but you can figure that out for yourself, especially since the Holy Spirit lives in you. Furthermore, ask your accountability partner to help you build protection against temptation. In our text, Paul said that believers are to put off the old self and put on the new self. Actually, he did not say that as a command, but he used the Aorist tense for the verbs, which means he was saying that you should behave as believers because of your reality, which is your union with Christ. You have already put off the old, sometime in the past, and you have put on the new. In other words, your position in Christ should spur you to action.

When Alison and I travel, we resemble some form of a modern-day version of the Beverly Hillbillies. We drag a great deal of luggage all over the place because we want to make sure that we have enough clothes. One friend in Australia told us, “Packing like an American is one thing. It is another thing to bring the house.” Whenever we arrive home from a trip like the one we just completed, we wash all our clothes, whether we used them or not.

Here is what God says about the old clothes of our old selves – “Don’t wash them, burn them.” Christ is in you – put the deeds of the old man to death! Quit putting yourself in the path of temptation. Next:

4. Repentance and forgiveness are beautiful gifts from God

In the lists that Paul gives to the Colossians and in several other books, it is apparent that he is saying, in essence, “Quit dabbling in these sins! This is the way you used to live before Christ. Furthermore, God’s wrath is coming on those whose lives are characterized by these sins. You do not have to live this way.” We know this – theoretically. This is what makes it so miserable when we fail. How can we handle it? God has given us the beautiful gifts of repentance and forgiveness. Acts 11:18 and 2 Timothy 2:25 both indicate that repentance is a gift from God. Indeed, his forgiveness, offered time and time again, will deliver us from the death trap of these sins. Believe God when he says these things – and, work hard at avoiding unnecessary temptation.

Rankin Wilbourne has written an outstanding book on the topic of the believer’s union with Christ. Timothy Keller’s endorsement of the book sold me and I am so glad I purchased it. There are, in Wilbourne’s book, a lot of simple, yet profound, analogies that help us understand the concept. Here is what he said about God’s forgiveness when we sin. Quote:

“The work of Christ sets you free from sin’s penalty. So rather than turning away from God, you can turn toward Christ precisely when you might be tempted to hide from him. You can boldly approach his throne with confidence because you remember you are completely covered by Christ’s righteousness. Only those who believe can obey.” Close quote. Do you begin to see how

understanding our union with Christ can move us toward freedom from sin? One last point:

5. “More of Jesus, less of me,” is God’s formula for holiness in our lives

Nature abhors a vacuum. It is not enough to put the sins of the flesh to death. You must nurture the habits of the new man. The only possible way there is going to be less of me is when there is an immediate decision for there to be more of Jesus. How can that be? By spending time in the word, by prayer, by interaction with the body, which is a huge part of our victory. Do not be too busy to spend time with Jesus. You are united with him and your only hope for holiness is in that union. Sit at his feet. Admire his beauty. Worship the one who took your sin so that you might be made righteous. He will perfect the holiness that has already been introduced into your life. It is a promise. Believe it and act upon it. Let’s pray.