

Taking Off the Grave Clothes and Putting On the New Life

We're continuing our study of the book of Colossians, so let's turn together to **Col. 3:1-11**

Every year dozens of people fake their own deaths to escape the problems of life and start anew. One young woman, Elizabeth Greenwood, began the process of faking her death, but after holding her own death certificate in her hand, decided instead to go on a quest to track down people who have faked their own deaths and interview experts in the art of disappearance in order to better understand why and how people take such an extreme action to escape life's troubles. Along the way she learned a few do's and don'ts when faking your own death. One big "don't" she learned is, don't Google yourself to see what people are saying about you. Olivia Newton John's ex-boyfriend Patrick McDermott faked his death in 2005 to escape financial troubles, by chartering a boat and supposedly falling overboard, but investigators found him in Mexico 5 years later. What tipped them off was that someone in a small Mexican town kept googling a website devoted to finding what happened to Patrick McDermott. He just couldn't resist googling his old life to see what people were saying. People who are truly dead don't Google themselves.

The problems of life come in many shapes and sizes, but the Bible tells us that all our problems originate from one massive problem: which is sin. God's answer to that biggest problem in our lives - our sin - isn't for us to fake our death and start a new life in Cancun, His answer is for us to die to our sin and start a new life in Christ! Col. 3:3 says, *For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God.*

Romans 6 unpacks this spiritual truth even more in vv. 3-4:

³Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

We have died with Christ and have been raised with Christ in newness of life! That's true! But because we've been raised in newness of life, we need to think like we've been raised and act like we've been raised in newness of life. Col. 3:1 *If (since) you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above.* We died and were raised with Christ but our flesh isn't completely dead, is it? Sin still is very much alive and active in our hearts. We're still googling our old life to see what it's up to. There's this constant tension between the old us and the new us. It's a constant fight of faith - to believe God's promises over what our flesh wants. One day that tension will be done away with once and for all, but for now because we have been raised with Christ, Paul says we need to be what we are. Seek the things that are above and not the things that are of earth.

When Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, Lazarus was fully alive, but he needed to have his grave cloths removed and clothes that were appropriate for living beings put on. When he came out of the tomb he was alive, but he was tightly wrapped and bound by grave cloths. Jesus knew those graveclothes would hinder Lazarus for living life so he said, take them off! That is a picture of our lives in Christ! We are fully alive in Christ, but while we live on this earth, we have these grave clothes of sin that keep wrapping around us and hinder us from living the life God intended for us to live.

If you are a child of God, you have been given a new life and a new identity. You are in Christ and your life is hidden with Christ in God. Sin isn't your master anymore, Christ is. We have been given a new life, a new heart, a new power, the power of the Holy Spirit, and by that power we are able to do what our flesh could never do, what rules and regulations could never do, we are able to take the grave clothes of sin off and put on the new life we have been given in Christ. Paul begins to lay out in the next few verses some of the grave clothes that we need to take off, then he'll begin to lay out the clothes that are appropriate for our new life that we need to put on. But Paul begins with one of the biggest sins that hinder us from the life God intends for us:

1. Take off the grave clothes of sexual immorality

⁵ Put to death therefore what is earthly in you:^[b] sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. Vv. 5-7

I think it's worthwhile for me to repeat a point I made last week: when Paul tells us to seek the things above - to be heavenly minded - and to put to death what is earthly in us, we don't want to get the idea that we're supposed to live in some kind of detached state of mind where all we think about is what heaven's going to be like, how many angels can dance on the head of a pin, and whether there are sports in heaven and we become indifferent to anything having to do with this life like being responsible or hard working or enjoying the special moments in life because we see all that as earthly. What Paul is laying out here is incredibly practical. Setting our minds on things above means walking heaven's values out here on earth in really practical ways - and we'll see that next week in verse 12. Things that are on earth, and putting to death what is earthly doesn't mean we stop enjoying this beautiful earth that God created, or the pleasures that God has so abundantly provided on this earth. What is earthly in context means the destructive ways that sin twists and distorts the good things that God created in order to destroy our souls and our relationships with other people and with God.

One of the most destructive of these is sexual sin. Sex itself isn't bad. Paul isn't saying, put sex to death. Sex was created by God as a good thing. Sin always takes what God created to be beautiful and beneficial to our lives and to our relationships and to society and distorts it until it destroys our lives, our relationships and eventually our society. Sexual immorality, impurity, passion (or lust, meaning uncontrolled sexual urges), evil desires (referring to desires that are dark in nature), and greed - in this context referring to a hunger for physical pleasure - all of these are ways that sin corrupts the good gift of sex.

God doesn't forbid sex before marriage, or adultery, or pornography, or homosexuality, because He is mean and prudish. He forbids it because He loves us and knows that these things will destroy our souls, our relationships, and our society. God puts up the guardrail of marriage to protect us, not to hurt us. One of the strongest signs of a decaying society is a decaying morality. Sodom and Gomorrah was evil through and through, but the sin that was the final straw that brought God's judgment down on them was sexual sin. They pushed the envelope of sexual sin until God, in His love could not allow it to continue because it would continue to metastasize like a cancer, destroying more and more people. Verse 6 warns us that one day, whether we believe it or not, God will judge this world for the way it has ignored and rejected His guardrails and flaunted sin.

Jesus didn't come to ruin our lives, he came to save us from the destruction that sin always brings and to free us from the grave clothes of sin so that we could live the lives God intended for us to live. God's guardrails don't repress our lives, they protect our lives and in the area of sex, that means living within the guardrails of marriage.

2. Take off the grave clothes of anger (vs. 8)

But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander...(vs. 8)

Paul mentions four manifestations of anger: anger, wrath, malice, and slander. Anger is a God-given emotion that is meant to flare when we see genuine wrong and injustice being done and its purpose is to drive us to take action to right the wrong and free the oppressed. It's not wrong to be angry when you see someone being wronged or when you, yourself, are being wronged. There is a redemptive and God-glorifying way to express anger that doesn't destroy relationships or burn bridges. Anger is a God-given emotion.

But sin takes this God-given emotion and turned it into something very self-centered, so that we get angry when we don't get our way, or when someone does us wrong, and rather than motivate us to take redemptive action, sinful anger motivates us to get revenge. To hurt the person who hurt us. To manipulate and control others by our anger to get what we want.

- The Greek word for anger describes a smouldering sense of hostility, even hatred, towards someone.
- Wrath or rage is anger on steroids. It is the explosion of anger. Some people hold their anger in, and it burns quietly, burning up their souls and slowly torching their relationships. Maybe they find passive-aggressive ways to express their anger. Others explode in rage. Like a fire out of control, rage burns up everything in its path, it is very destructive. Later on, when a rage-filled person calms down, often they regret what they've said and done in their rage, but the damage is done. You can't take it back or undo it. God can bring healing and restoration when there's true repentance, but it's incredibly destructive.
- Malice - the word in Greek means "evil" and indicates a desire to cause harm to someone else.
- Slander - this is speaking evil of someone else. A close companion to gossip, this is speaking words that hurt a person's reputation in the eyes of others.

All these expressions of sinful anger are grave clothes that are not appropriate for the child of God to walk in or live in. They can do a lot of damage, and they also distort the image of God in us and hurt our Christian witness. When anger smoulders inside of us and motivates us to hurt others with words and actions, it does damage not only to other people, but to our souls. Anger is like acid, it eats away at the container it's in. Take off the grave clothes, Paul says. We can begin by praying "Lord, help me to put off anger and put on patience, kindness, and love in its place. I can't do it without your help." Putting off anger isn't the end of the story - we need to put something on in its place, but we'll get to that in the next message.

3. Take off the grave cloths of coarse and deceptive communication (vs. 8-9)

But now you must put them all away:... obscene talk from your mouth. ⁹ Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self^[d] with its practices...vv. 8-9

God cares a lot about how and what we communicate. God is a communicating God, and has given us His word in written form and His word in the Person of Jesus who is called the *logos*, the Word of God Incarnate. One of the things that make mankind unique is our ability to communicate with one another on so many levels from frivolous to funny to profound.

Our relationships with one another are, to a great degree, guided by how we communicate with one another. God created us as master communicators so that we could glorify Him with our words. Sin polluted our hearts and polluted hearts produce polluted words. Obscene talk is literally filthy language and that covers a lot of ground. Any speech that contaminates us or others qualifies as filthy language.

Trashing the gate

Elliot Clark writes an insightful article entitled, *We're Not All Called To Be Missionaries* and she opens by sharing how she was sitting in an international airport terminal surrounded by a group of teens heading home from a mission trip. They all wore matching t-shirts and were having a great time sharing photos and comparing stories from their mission trip. But her enjoyment of this youthful group turned to embarrassment as she watched them trash the airport gate, and heard several of them dropping f-bombs. Filthy language is by no means limited to cursing, but it certainly includes cursing. People watch and listen and we can't separate their perception of Jesus in us from the language they hear from us. If we're "trashing the gate" with filthy language, the witness we're leaving behind may not be what we want it to be. There is no way to separate our words from our witness: one way or the other we are representing Jesus. Filthy language, whether it's making crude comments or cutting people down with sarcasm or constantly complaining or using foul words, will trash the gate and leave a negative witness for Christ. Jesus calls us to do better and speak better. Take off the grave clothes of filthy speech.

And take off the grave clothes of deceptive speech too. Don't lie to each other. Few things torch trust and credibility like being caught in a lie. The church shouldn't be a place where people lie to each other - it should be a place of gracious honesty. Jesus says unwrap the grave clothes off our hearts and our words so that our communication doesn't promote pollution or deception but brings life and grace to them.

4. Be what God created you to be! (vv. 9-11)

seeing that you have put off the old self^[d] 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,^[e] free; but Christ is all, and in all. Col. 3:9-11

Here's what it comes down to - God created mankind to be a noble creature, standing upright, honest, true, and good. Sin has distorted God's image in man almost beyond recognition (and in some evil people beyond recognition), but Jesus came to restore God's image in us. As the Holy Spirit empowers us to take the grave clothes of sin off and put on the new clothes of Christ on, we are renewed in the image of our Creator. There are no human distinctions here - it doesn't matter what our nationality is, or social status is, or religious background is. Christ is all, and in all. God is working in all of us - men,

women, children, Greeks, Jews, Italians, Irish, Africans, Indians, Asians, Europeans, you name it, to make us like Jesus and what God intended for men and women to be in the first place. Be what God created you to be!

But we know we still struggle with sin constantly. We may have died with Christ, but we're still googling our old life to see what it's up to. Stuff like anger, lust, maliciousness, the temptation to lie and so many other sins flare up the way it used to before we came to Christ to the point that we may wonder, are we really dead to sin? Or are we just faking our deaths? Let me close with this encouragement:

The Christian walk is a walk of faith. It is a walk of believing God's word and His promises. The Bible says that if you're truly trusting in Christ, you died with him and have been raised to new life in him. Believe it! God's word says He has given you a new heart - a heart that wants to love and obey God our Father. Believe it! The tension comes from the war we live in: our flesh hates the Spirit, and the Spirit hates the flesh. Every single day, every single choice, we need to hold onto God's greater promise that life doesn't come from sin, it comes from Him. Believe God at His word. Believe God's promises. Have faith that greater is He that is in you than he that is in the world. Every day we should get up and ask the Spirit to help us take off the grave clothes of sin - and be specific: "I'm struggling with the desire to lie, temptations to look at inappropriate things, my temper keeps flaring and scorching the people around me. Lord, help me to die to that sin. I don't want to reform it, I want to kill it. But I can't do it without Your help."

We died in Christ and have been raised in Christ, but we live in the tension of a new heart and an old heart at war. One day we'll be free from sin and free to serve God totally and perfectly, but until then, we need to fight every day. Die to sin and live to Christ every day. Take off the grave clothes of sin and put on the righteousness of Christ in every decision.