

This evening we continue our study in Paul's letter to the Colossians. Our text is 3:5-11. This passage begins a section in this letter to the Colossian church which deals with some of the details of practical Christian living. In most of Paul's letters to the churches he begins with teaching perspectives about the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ and then transitions to describing the kind of life that expected of those who have believed in Jesus and are following him. We have looked carefully at Paul's teaching about Jesus and the glorious truths about being united to him by faith in the first part of this letter and now we will begin our study of what Paul is teaching us about the Christian life in the second half of this letter.

Paul's practice of treating the nuts and bolts of Christian living after teaching his readers about their salvation in Christ is very significant and very important. There is no question that the Christian life includes a lot of do-s and don'ts. There are sins that are forbidden. There are commands to be obeyed. The law of God and the need to obey it is a very significant part of the Christian message. But it is absolutely crucial that the do-s and don'ts of Christian living never be separated from the good news of salvation in Jesus. To consider the law of God apart from the gospel is to create a different religion. It is not the religion of the Bible. The necessity of obedience to God's law is an integral part of the biblical message, but it may never be separated from Jesus Christ and salvation in him. The law exposes our sin to show us our need of Christ and to drive us to him and the keeping the law for believers is the thankful and willing response of those who are forgiven and renewed through being united to Christ by faith. Thinking of obedience separate from the gospel is not biblical Christianity.

But understood in its gospel context, obedience is an essential part of the Christian life. Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." And keeping Jesus' commandments involves both turning away from sin and turning to positive obedience. There are certain sinful behaviors and attitudes that are to be turned from and there are other good behaviors and attitudes that are to be turned to. The Christian life involves many do-s and don'ts. Understood in the light of the truth of the gospel, the don'ts are about turning away from death and the do-s are about living the abundant life. The don'ts are about turning away from slavery and the do-s are about embracing freedom. The don'ts are about avoiding sub-human living and the do-s are about the fullness of true humanity as God designed it.

The verses that we are looking at this evening are about turning from sin. In the next paragraph Paul turns to the kinds of behaviors and attitudes that believers are to put on. In verse 5 Paul writes, "Put to death therefore what is earthly in you; sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desires and covetousness, which is idolatry." The word "therefore" connects this exhortation to the gospel. In the first four verses of the chapter Paul had reminded the Colossians that they had been raised with Christ, that they had died and their life was hidden with Christ in God, that Christ was their life and that when Christ appeared they would appear with him in glory. That is all gospel. These things are true of all believers. They are alive in Christ. And it is on that basis that believers are to put to death what is earthly in them.

Because they are alive in Christ they are to put sexual immorality to death in their lives. They are to put impurity to death. They are to put passion to death. They are to put evil desire to death. They are to put covetousness, which is idolatry to death.

Clearly this is serious business. The idea of putting things to death emphasizes that. It is sort of like fighting cancer in the human body using chemotherapy. The cancer is deadly. If the cancer cells are not destroyed, they will destroy the person in whom they are active. The process is painful. But it is urgent. It is absolutely necessary. Without it the patient will die.

Jesus makes the same point using similar imagery in Matthew 5:30 “And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go to hell.” The imagery of putting to death and cutting off your right hand underscores how urgent it is to deal decisively with sin.

Verse 6 of our text makes that point. “On account of these the wrath of God is coming.” Those who do not put sin to death will one day experience the wrath of God. Other verses speak about the wrath of God on the unsaved in the present, but this verse speaks of the future. “The wrath of God is coming.” Those who do not put sin to death will face the wrath of God at the end of their lives.

It is important to grapple with the various ways that Paul speaks of believers. He has just affirmed that they had been raised with Christ and that their lives were hidden with Christ in God. He has assured them that when Christ appears they will appear with him in glory. But now he warns them that if they do not put sin to death in their lives they can expect to face the wrath of God. He does not put it quite like that, but that is clearly implied here. Those who fail to put sin to death in their lives will surely face the wrath of God at the end of the age.

There is a tension here that must be maintained. The gospel is for sinners. All who hear it are invited to come to Jesus to freely receive the forgiveness of their sins. Whoever believes in Jesus shall not perish but have eternal life. We come as we are. We cannot make ourselves worthy by trying to change our lives first.

“Nothing in my hands I bring. Simply to thy cross I cling.” But one of the gifts that comes with forgiveness is life in Christ. We are changed from being dead in sin to being alive in Christ. And that leads to putting sin to death; we want to and we must put sin to death. And if we do not, the wrath of God is coming. If we are truly saved, we will live the life of the saved. If we do not live the life of the saved, we are not truly saved.

Let’s think a little more about putting sin to death. I want to begin by putting the idea of putting sin to death in the broader context of the Christian life. David Powlison, shortly before he died last year, wrote a book called *How does Sanctification Work?* Sanctification is what we are talking about in this sermon. Sanctification is the process of growing in holiness. Putting sin to death is part of sanctification. In that book, David Powlison is

arguing against reductionism in our thinking about sanctification. One of his chapter titles is “Is There One Key to Sanctification?” And the answer is no? There are a number of things that contribute to our sanctification.

In a chapter called “What Changes You?” Powlison mentions five things. Truth changes you. God changes you. Suffering and struggle change you. Wise people change you. And fifthly, You change. Many things contribute to growing in holiness. We change through the influence of biblical teaching. We change through God’s miraculous work in our hearts and lives. Suffering and struggles are part of the way that we change. And other people influence us in profound ways – godly examples are a factor in sanctification. But then there is simply our decision to change – you change.

Putting sin to death is something that we do. We do it using strength that God provides. We do it through the life that we have in Christ. But it is something that we are called to do. There are many factors that contribute, but the factor that is in focus here is our choice to put sin to death and however that choice is implemented in our lives.

It is saying “no” to sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. It is deciding not to engage in these things. It is resisting the temptation to engage in these sins. It is exercising self-control and not indulging desires towards these sins. The idea of putting to death what is earthly in us points to the extent of the action that we take against these sins. Paul is not talking about lessening our involvement in these sins. He is talking about not doing them at all. He is talking about rooting them out completely. He is talking about destroying every hint of them in our lives. Putting something to death is radical. It is about turning completely away from these sins.

That does not mean that we will every be completely successful in this life. The fact that Paul tells us to put these sins to death assumes that they are not yet put to death. Christians never get to the point in this life when even these sorts of sins are completely eradicated. And yet that is the goal. We can never just allow these sins to remain in us in a less dominating way. We are not allowed to be at peace with a little sexual immorality or a little covetousness. Putting these sins to death means that the goal is to kill them off completely. We are never done this work of putting sin to death until it is really and truly dead. We are to seek to utterly stop sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.

Now this is easier said than done. It’s one thing to want to put sin to death; it is another thing to do it. Wanting to put sin to death is a good thing. That already is a miracle of grace because by nature we just want to indulge. Having a desire to do what God is telling us to do here is an important step and if that desire is there we should be encouraged. But it is not a simple thing to do. If we are serious about this we will know that just determining to put sin to death does not make it happen. Temptations are powerful. Galatians 5:17 describes the reality, “For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.” The desires of the flesh are the desires of our sinful nature which are not eradicated until death. If we are true

believers there will also be the desires for holiness that come from the Spirit, but the desires of the flesh mean that putting sin to death in our lives is not easy or automatic.

We have seen that the command to put sin to death calls for a decision and indeed many decisions. We are to say “no” and we are to do “no.” It is an act of the will. It is a decision. It is an exercise of self-control. Self-control is one of the fruit of the Spirit according to Galatians 5:23. We see this in the other exhortations in this paragraph. Verse 8 says, “But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth.” Verse 9, “Do not lie to one another” Paul is appealing to our will. He is saying “Just say No!” Decide not to do these things. Put them away. Control your attitudes and your actions. Exercise self-control.

However, if we have tried to do that we know that it doesn’t work. Not all by itself. Just determining to put sin to death does not work. All by itself, it actually makes matters worse. We do not have enough self-control. “Just Say No.” does not work. The solution – the way forward – is the point of Powlison’s book that I mentioned earlier. The biblical way of making progress against sin is multifaceted. If you take one biblical theme in isolation from all the others you will fail. That is why the idea of this passage that we must say no to sin, all by itself, is not enough and does not work. And Paul is not giving us this exhortation in isolation. That is why the fourth word in this paragraph is “therefore.” That connects the command to put sin to death to what comes before – “You have been raised with Christ. You have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. And so on.

So we are to make the decision to put sin to death and to follow through with that decision while thinking about the gospel. Thinking about Jesus and what we have in him. So our focus is not only on the sin and not doing it and resisting the temptations, it is also, at the same time, on Jesus and our relationship to him and the strength and the motivation that he gives us to actually put sin to death. These two things go together. What we need is to be “saying no to sin” and at the same time having our will and our heart strengthened and encouraged in Christ.

We see this in verse 2 of this chapter where Paul says, just before telling the Colossians to put sin to death, “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on the earth.” When we studied that verse we saw that it means looking at earthly life from a heavenly perspective, which is the biblical perspective of the gospel and all that it entails. Setting our minds on things above nurtures our love for Jesus and the Father and the Holy Spirit. It helps us to see sin for what it is and obedience for what it is. It helps us to see the glorious vision of what God is up to in his plan for the renewal of all things. It reminds us of forgiveness in Jesus, and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

And so what is happening is that as we are deciding to put sin to death, our faith, hope, and love are being strengthened to actually follow through and to get up and try again when we fail. As we seek to exercise

strength in putting sin to death, we need the continuous input of strength and encouragement through the gospel.

T Stafford makes this point in an article called “Getting serious about Lust in an Age of Smirks.” He writes, “Desires do not go away simply because we want them to. They do not generally disappear like a soap bubble when we pray. They do fade into the background, however, when a greater desire replaces them.”

So putting sin to death is something that we do, and Paul is emphasizing that here, but the doing, the killing of sin happens in conjunction with many other things. It happens as love and hope are nurtured in the gospel. It happens as love and hope are nurtured through growing in our knowledge of God. It happens as our relationship with God becomes more intimate through worship and prayer and meditation on the word of God. It happens as we live in fellowship with other Christians and are inspired and encouraged and exhorted and rebuked and guided. It happens as God strengthens us through the testing of hardships in our lives. And it happens as God the Holy Spirit works in our hearts.

Powlison’s point is very important and it is truly biblical. Putting sin to death involves decisions and actions that we take, but the strength to do it comes from God directly through the Holy Spirit working in us, and the ongoing strengthening comes from engaging with the Word of God, from living through suffering and from the influence of fellow believers. And so what we do in putting sin to death is related to all kinds of other things that make it possible for us to actually make progress in doing that.

Let’s look now at the sins that Paul mentions here. The comprehensive term is “what is earthly in you.” The specifics of what is earthly in you are “sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire and covetousness which is idolatry.” “What is earthly in you” is not referring to what is physical but what is sinful. “What is earthly in you” is defined by the list that follows. “What is earthly in you” is sexual sin. Any sex outside of marriage. Lusting after someone who is not your husband or wife. Pornography. Homosexuality. Sex before marriage. The Bible is very sex positive when it comes to sex within marriage. But outside of that very special place it is sinful and destructive. Sexual sin was common in the ancient world. That is why Paul mentions it. It is common in our world. There are many temptations. And Paul is saying that Christians are to put all sexual immorality, and impurity to death. Passions in this context also refers to sexual sin.

Evil desires, covetousness and idolatry are broader. Evil desires are desires for anything that is off limits according to God’s law. Covetousness is similar. It refers to desires that are too strong and the connection between covetousness and idolatry indicates that an evil desire is any desire that is stronger than our desire for God. It is worshiping something other than God. It is living for something other than God.

So you have the whole gamut of idols. Money, comfort, reputation, entertainment, hobbies, loved ones, power, control, security, etc. All of these things are good as long as they are not too important to us. All of these are good unless we are living for them – unless they are idols.

Paul says that we are to put all these to death. One important part of the Christian life is fighting against these sins. Killing them. Not indulging them. Not doing certain things is an important part of the Christian life. There is much more to it, but this is an essential part of it.

In verses 7 & 8 Paul mentions another list of sins that are to be repudiated. “In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth.” Verse 9a, “Do not lie to one another.”

This list has a different focus. The first list is mostly sins of the heart which manifest themselves in actions. These sins are mostly internal or private. These are sins of the mind. Sexual sins take place behind closed doors. The sins of the second list are more sins that break down community. They are sins that disturb the fellowship of the people of God. They destroy or poison relationships. These are to be put away. Anger, wrath, malice, slander, obscene speaking, lying. Put these behaviors and attitudes away, Paul is saying to the Colossians and to us. He’s going to speak about the behaviors and attitudes that they are to put on in verse 12 and following, but putting off is part of the picture.

The fact that Paul mentions these two lists of sins to be turned from is important and helpful and encouraging because it gives us a true picture of the reality of remaining sin in the church and in every believer. Paul spoke of these things because it was necessary. Believers struggle with these kinds of sins. These kinds of sins are found in the church. The church is not made up of people who have everything under control. The church is not made up of people who have conquered all their lusts and passions and idols and anti-social behaviors. The church is made up of sinful people saved by grace who are being sanctified, but who have a long way to go.

That is encouraging. Sometimes we may think, “How can I be a Christian when I have not conquered this sin?” Or “What sad excuse for a church is this where there is immorality and malice and slander?” Paul is saying here that that is a normal Christian and a normal church. He wrote these verses to the Colossian church because they were struggling with these sins.

To say that this is encouraging is not to say that we can be complacent with sin in our lives and sin in the church. In verse 7 Paul makes it clear that living in sin is not compatible with true conversion. “In these you too once walked, when you were living in them.” There is a difference between walking in sin or living in sin and fighting against sin. In verse 9 he says that the Colossians have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self. They have turned from their sins. They have embraced the life of obedience. Their lives have changed. But they were still struggling. There was still work to be done and progress to be made. They were no longer what they once were, but neither were they yet what they would one day be.

So there is this negative side to the Christian life in the sense of fighting against sin. Part of what salvation means is being set free from the power of sin and so being enabled to put it to death and to put it away. This

belongs to the good news. Part of what Jesus gives us in salvation is the ability to see the ugliness and the destructiveness and the dehumanizing nature of sin. To live in sin is to live in the realm of death. And so to put sin to death is to repudiate attitudes and behaviors that are toxic and evil and harmful. The best thing for sin is that it is destroyed. And so it is good news that we are enabled in the gospel to put sin to death.

Let us hear Paul exhortations here in that light. Jesus came to save us from our sins. This is part of what that means. And so let us be enthusiastic and zealous to root out and destroy – to put to death everything that is earthly in us.