

Working Out Our True Spiritual Reality

Colossians 3:5-11

In the Brothers Grimm's fairy tale, *The Frog Prince*, a princess befriends a frog who magically transforms into a handsome prince. In the original Grimm version of the story the frog's spell was broken when the princess flung the frog against a wall in disgust. Most of us are more familiar with the modern versions in which the transformation was triggered by the princess kissing the frog. With the kiss, the frog became who he truly was. This theme of being something other than what one appears is the stuff of many great stories and fables, and movies, right?

This is the story of us as well. We are in the process of becoming who we truly are in Christ. Dead to sin. Alive to God. A new creation belonging to the heavenly realm. One day revealed with Christ glorious (3:4). This IS who we are in Christ. And yet this reality is not now fully seen. There is work to be done. We must work out our true spiritual reality.

As Paul continues his letter, he goes on to talk about the need to put off sin and put on godly character. Today, we will look at the first part of this process – putting off of sin. Next week we will look at putting on godly character. In Colossians 3:5-11, Paul gives two lists of sins that we must put to death. The first deals with sexual sins; the second are sins of attitude and speech. And so let's look at the first list. Paul says is that . . .

I. We work out our true spiritual reality by putting to death sexual sins (vv. 5-7).

⁵ Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.

What Paul says here flows from what he has just said in 3:1-4 about who are in Christ. We belong to the heavenly realm and since that is who we truly are, we must *put to death* . . . *what is earthly* in us. There are desires and actions that belong to our old sinful nature that must be put to death. To *put to death* means to “make it dead;” “to stop completely.”

Specifically, Paul says that we must put to death sexual sins. Put to death *immorality*, which is a general term for any kind of sexual sin. Put to death *impurity*, which refers to moral corruption, but it is often applied to sexual sins. Put to death *passion*, or “lust” as the NIV puts it. This is a general term for a strong desire, but with the previous terms it refers here to sinful sexual passions. Put to death *evil desire*, which refers to sinful desires of all kinds, but again in the context it most likely refers to sinful sexual desires. And then finally, Paul says to put to death *covetousness*. *Covetousness* is an inappropriate desire for more and more. If we are not fully satisfied in Christ, we can begin to crave other things. Given the fact that all the sins listed here are sexual sins, it likely that Paul is specifically talking about coveting of a sexual nature. Paul calls such coveting, *idolatry*. If there is a longing for these sexual sins to be the thing that satisfies, then that is putting them in the place that alone belongs to God. Paul commands us to put to death all of these sexual sins because to pursue any of them is idolatry.

Paul adds two clarifying statements about the sexual sins he lists. He says . . .

⁶ On account of these the wrath of God is coming. ⁷ In these you too once walked, when you were living in them.

How unthinkable it is for a believer to keep living in these sins because it is *on account of these things that the wrath of God is coming*. Scripture tells us that the holy anger of God, which will come at the end of the age, is coming because of these kinds of sins. Now, the Scriptures tells us that God's people will not experience this wrath (1 Thess. 5:19). Romans 5:9 says that having been justified by Jesus' blood we are saved from God's wrath. But Paul's point is, why would we continue walk in the very sins that merit God's wrath.

Paul also says that these sins should be put to death because they were part of your former life before Christ. There was a time when you *once walked* in them. But that was when you were *living in them*. In other words, you walked in them when you were still alive to the earthly realm. These kinds of sexual sins were part of your lives before coming to Christ; they are not to be part of your new life in Christ. And so, put them to death.

If Paul were to write this letter to a church in Manhattan, KS today, he would no doubt list the same sins. Sexual sin continues to be rampant in our culture as well as in the church.

God has created us as sexual beings and when sex is used as God intended within the confines of a committed love, in marriage, it is a beautiful gift. But God's design has been corrupted. And we are tempted to step outside of God's design for sex and pursue it in sinful ways – sex before marriage, adultery, entertaining lust in our minds, pornography, and the list goes on and on.

We are to put all such things to death. Paul is not looking for us to be just a little less sinful than the world around us. He wants us to put to death everything of a sinful sexual nature. Are you doing that? Or are you allowing the life of such sins to linger? Are the things that you are exposing yourself to on your phone or computer, or TV, or in movies, pure and holy, or are they impure? Are there any relationships, whether you are married or single, that are not sexually pure? Put such sins to death.

At the end of the sermon, I'm going give some application thoughts how we do this, but let me say a couple of things about sexual sin. If you are struggling with sexual sin, there is usually a lot of shame attached to that. And shame makes you want to hide. But here's the thing, you are not going to put sexual sin to death on your own. You need others to help. And so one of the best things you can do is to reach out to someone and admit you have a problem – that you need help. You are not alone in your struggle. And so be brave and tell someone. Tell a friend. Tell a parent. Tell me. Bringing that sin out into the light is the first step of putting it to death. Men, one of the ways you can do that is to sign up for the group called *Graced Based Recovery*, which we will be offering again this fall.

I want to say this to the younger people here. I know that this is hard. You are growing up in a world where there is such easy access to such things. And you are curious; you are interested. And there is nothing wrong with that. God has created you with sexual desires, which is a very good thing. But to go down the road of pornography, and lust, and sex before marriage is going to be like inviting a massive termite colony into your house. From the inside out, it will be devastating. And just like how termites destroy the strength of a home, so too sexual sin will bring so much devastation in your life. The strength of your character will be consumed. I can guarantee you that twenty or thirty years from now, your older self will wish your younger self had stayed away from sexual sins. And so if you are struggling with these things, tell someone. Tell your parents. Tell your group leader. Tell someone.

We must work out our true spiritual reality by putting to death sexual sins. But secondly, Paul says that we . . .

II. We work out our true spiritual reality by putting away sins of attitude and speech (vv. 8-11)

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

To *put them all away* has the sense of “to get rid of.” Don’t let these things be part of your life.

Just like in verse 5, Paul lists five sins. Before we talk about them, there is an important interpretive question about the last phrase, *from your mouth*. Does it apply only to the final two sins listed – *slander and obscene talk* – or to the whole list? It can be understood either way. I think it modifies the final two sins. But since Paul will go on to talk about lying, I think that how we speak to each other is the main thing in view in this whole list. And so, the first three sins, while attitudes of the heart, if they are present will often be expressed verbally.

And so, Paul commands us to put away *anger* and *wrath*. These are very similar. Some suggest that *anger* is more of a settled feeling whereas *wrath* is more of an outburst. Put away *malice*, which is a disposition of wanting harm for another person. We are also to put away *slander and obscene talk*. *Slander* is the word for blasphemy. It usually refers to speech against God, but here it refers to speech that defames the character of another person. *Obscene talk* probably refers to abusive speech used when defaming someone.

Paul wants us to put such things away in all our relationships, but he is specifically focused on how such sins of the heart and speech must be put away because they are destructive to relationships in the body of Christ. As we go on in verses 9-11, it is clear that Paul has in mind relationships in the body of Christ. In verse 9 he says . . .

⁹ *Do not lie to one another, . . .*

This is another sin of the tongue that must be put away. And the fact that he says, *to one another*, indicates that the main thing Paul has in view here are interactions among believers. We must not lie to a brother or sister in Christ. Lying is destructive to Christian community. In Ephesians 4:15, Paul says that it is through speaking the truth in love that we grow up into Christ as a body. We are to be a community of truth.

Now, the basis for this command is what Paul says in the second half of verse 9 all the way through verse 11. We must 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.

Typically, we read this and we think individualistically, but as we understand the flow of Paul's thinking, he wants us to understand this corporately. *Old self* refers to those not in Christ and who therefore belong to the old lineage of Adam. It is the unregenerated, ruled and dominated by sin. *New self* refers to the new humanity in Christ. It is who we are corporately as the regenerated people of God.

As the *new self*, we have *put off the old self with its evil practices* and we are now *being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator*. The new self is continually being renewed in *knowledge* about God such that we take on more and more of His character.

In verse 11, Paul says this about the new self, this corporate identity of who we are in Christ.

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

When Paul says, *Here there is not Greek or Jew . . .* *Hear* refers to back to the *new self*. This is how we know that Paul intends us to think about the *new self* as our new corporate identity in Christ.

Paul uses a lot of contrasts. *Greek and Jew*. A *Greek* would be anyone who is not a Jew. *Circumcised and uncircumcised* essentially repeats the first contrast. Paul likely uses this to confront the false teachers who were insisting on certain Jewish identity markers like circumcision. *Barbarian* and *Scythian* are probably examples of those who are uncircumcised. A *barbarian* was someone who didn't speak Greek and so it was someone who was not only a foreigner but was an uncivilized foreigner. *Scythian* refers to inhabitants north of the Black Sea who were considered an extreme example of barbarians. *Slave* and *free* would point to one's social status.

Paul says that in this new self, this new corporate humanity brought about in Christ, there are no ethnic, class, cultural, or social distinctions. Rather, *Christ is all, and in all*. *Christ is all*. He is the center of all. He is what matters. The second phrase, *and in all*, refers to how Jesus brings unity because he is the one who indwells all regardless of racial, religious, or cultural background.

As you think about these sins of attitude and speech, are there any that you need to put aside? And specifically, as you think about your relationships in the body, do you have any anger or wrath directed towards others in the body? Is there malice? Is there any slander or abusive speech coming from your tongue about others in the body? Do you lie to others?

Any of these attitudes and sins of speech are destructive to the new humanity that God has brought into existence in Christ. If you have any of this in your heart or on your tongue, Paul says that you must put them all aside. We work out our true spiritual reality as the one, united body of Christ by putting away sins of attitude and speech.

Now, as we come to the end of our time, I want to briefly offer some thoughts about how we actually do what Paul commands us to do here. How do we actually put to death sin in our lives?

First, **make a decisive decision to put sin to death.** You must decide that you are going to do this. As you think about sexual sins in your life, or sins of attitude and speech, sometimes we want to hang on to them. Sometimes there is an aspect of them that gives us something we like or want and so we really are not determined to put it to death. Or sometimes we have the “just one more time” mentality. You can’t do that. You must decisively decide.

You need conviction about this. And the only way that you are going to have this is by spending time in the Scriptures seeing what the Bible says about your sin. And you need to spend time talking with God and pondering your sin in God’s presence. Ask God to bring you to a place of willingness and determination to put to death that sin. Ask Him to create conviction within your heart so that you will be determined to not let the sin linger.

Second, **remind yourself of your true spiritual reality.** Day after day, even as you continue to battle sin, count as true what Paul says about you in 3:1-4. You really have died and been raised up with Christ. You are a new creation seated with Christ in the heavenlies. Sometimes as we struggle with sin, we are tempted to believe otherwise. We think that there really is nothing new; that we are the same old sinful person. But that’s not who you truly are in Christ. And so remind yourself over and over again of your true identity in Christ.

Third, **remind yourself of the ugliness of sin.** Whatever sin you are dealing with was ugly enough that it merited God’s wrath. Again, what Jesus did on the cross means that you will not personally experience God’s wrath. But Jesus did. And so remind yourself that the sin you are struggling with put Jesus on the cross. Sometimes we fail to truly see the sinfulness of sin. Ask God to help you see your sin from His perspective.

The last thing I want to mention, is that **putting to death sin takes effort, but not self-effort.** It is something we do empowered by the Spirit of God. Paul has been confronting the false teachers who were promoting a religion of self-effort (2:16-23). Asceticism. Rules about food, and drink, and special religious days. Paul said in 2:23 that none of this is effective against the indulgence of the flesh. What is effective is effort empowered by the Spirit of God who dwells within

us (Rom. 8:9). Paul makes it clear in many places that putting to death sin and growing spiritually is something we do in partnership with the Spirit of God. For instance, in Galatians 5:16, Paul says:

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.

It is by the Spirit that we put to death sin. And so even as we work hard at this, we must do so with faith trusting God for spiritual help and strength. It is by the Spirit that we work out our true spiritual reality.

As much as I wish that this transformation was as easy as being kissed by a princess and, “poof, I’m transformed,” that’s not the way God has designed it. Instead, it is a slow and steady process of putting sin to death day-by-day that will continue for the duration of our lives on earth. But the end result is certain. We will be like Christ. And in that hope, we work out our true spiritual reality.