

# *Death to Sin*

## Colossians 3:5-11

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ May 14, 2023 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church



<sup>5</sup> Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). <sup>6</sup> On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. <sup>7</sup> These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. <sup>8</sup> But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. <sup>9</sup> Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices <sup>10</sup> and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. <sup>11</sup> In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all! (Colossians 3:5-11, NRSV)



Last Sunday I wasn't with you because we were in San Diego celebrating my son's graduation. Two down, two to go! We had the chance to worship with him at his church Sunday morning. They were celebrating a baptism and had set up a large portable baptismal right in the middle of the sanctuary – it looked a bit like a hot tub. At some point my wife leans over to me and says, "You know, we really ought to baptize people like that back home at Faith." By that she meant that instead of sprinkling people with water, we ought to dunk them all the way under. And I have to say, a part of me agrees with her.

Don't get me wrong, I don't think that getting dunked makes for a more legitimate baptism than getting sprinkled. I respectfully disagree with some of my Christian brothers and sisters in other traditions who argue the amount of water used in a baptism is crucial. I was baptized with a sprinkle of water, as were all of my kids, as were many of you. That is just as much a baptism as what I witnessed last Sunday. And yet, there is power in the symbolism of being fully immersed that is hard to replicate any other way.

You see, when a person is submerged beneath the surface of the water in baptism it points us to the reality that our old lives have died with Christ at the cross,

buried in the grave. But then, when that same person is raised up out of the water it points us to the equally powerful reality that we have been resurrected with Christ to new life. Paul writes in Romans 6:3-4, "**Do you not know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we were buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life.**"<sup>1</sup> This reminds us of the beautiful reality that Brett spoke to last week from the first few verses of this chapter in Colossians. We have been raised with Christ already! This new life he came to give us is already ours! Our lives are hidden in Christ now, today!

As I have said many times before, this is why our baptismal is located at the back of the sanctuary. It's a reminder to you every Sunday morning as you come into this worship space that if you have trusted Christ and been baptized, your identity is now rooted in the unshakable reality that you are a beloved child of God. You don't come to worship to earn God's favor, but come to worship *in response to God's favor!* There is a huge difference!

Do you believe that? In this moment you are a beloved daughter of God! Today you are a beloved son of God! I know that there is still much in your life that is not right, that the effects of sin still weigh you down and trip you up. I know that shame and guilt are always whispering in your ear. But if you are in Christ, then your hidden life, the life you can't always see but is nonetheless real, is that of God's beloved child. Best of all, there is nothing you have done to earn or deserve this. It's all by his grace. It's all motivated by his love for you. Amen?

Once you believe this truth of the gospel, everything changes. Pastor Tim Keller tells the story of a woman in his church who grew up in a tradition where she was always taught that God will only accept you if you are sufficiently good and ethical. She never heard the true gospel, that we are accepted by sheer grace through the work of Christ. And so when she learned the truth, she

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<sup>1</sup> This and all biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

found it to be frightening. When Keller asked her why such good news made her so afraid, she said,

If I was saved by my good works – then there would be a limit to what God would ask of me or put me through. I would be like a taxpayer with rights. I would have done my duty and now I would deserve a certain quality of life. But if it is really true that I am a sinner saved by grace – at God’s infinite cost – then there’s nothing he cannot ask of me.<sup>2</sup>

Her point was not that she now had to pay God back, as if we can ever pay God back. Rather, her point is that if God is truly so good, so beautiful, so compassionate, so generous in grace towards us, it’s only fitting that we, as recipients of these blessings, respond by freely offering our whole lives back to God. In fact, the person who does not do so, is the person who does not truly understand what it is that God has done for him or her.

One of the ways we offer our lives back to God is in recognizing the parts of our lives which do not yet conform to his will or purposes, and then working to see those areas come into conformity. Many of us have been reading through Paul’s letter to the Romans, and one of the key verses in Romans states this plainly:

**I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, on the basis of God’s mercy, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable act of worship. Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God— what is good and acceptable and perfect.**<sup>3</sup>

Do you see what Paul is saying here? It’s *because of* God’s mercy that you delight to offer yourself to him sacrificially, placing your everyday, ordinary life in God’s hands to be conformed to his will. Not just your Sunday morning life, and not just the religious parts of your life, but every aspect of your life. As Eugene Peterson puts it, “your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life.”<sup>4</sup> You give it all to God to do with as God pleases.

This gets at one of the crucial aspects of the Christian life which we can easily forget, which is that even though we are saved by grace alone, and not by our good works, our salvation, if it is genuine, must eventually lead to good works. The theological words

for this are *justification* and *sanctification*. We are justified, made right with God, by sheer grace, which we receive in faith. But that justification must then lead to sanctification, which is a lifelong process of us cooperating with God to restore his image in us, to make us like Jesus. As Martin Luther famously put it, “We are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone.” James puts it this way, “**So, faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.**”<sup>5</sup>

Let’s put this clearly. If you are a Christian, then God has completely forgiven you for your sin. It no longer keeps you from him, or from the life he has for you. But there is still sin in your life, right? Is there anybody here today who has completely rid your life of sin? Okay, so now Jesus wants to get to work on that with you. Again, he doesn’t want you to trust and obey him as a way to make him happy with you or, as the woman in Tim Keller’s church once misunderstood, to accept you. He already loves you more than you will ever realize. And he wants to see the junk in your life cleaned up for that very reason, because sin does damage to us and others, and God hates to see damage done to his beloved children.

We must not take this lightly. Paul certainly doesn’t. Turning to our passage in Colossians, he pulls no punches: “**Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly.**” Don’t try to manage sin, or control it. Certainly don’t try to accommodate it. Kill it! Name it, and then slay it. There can be no compromise.

Some parents here have likely had a child come home one day with head lice. What a terrible experience. Head lice are incredibly tenacious. These nightmarish little parasites have tiny claws that help them gain a stranglehold grip on strands of hair. They can withstand chlorinated water, shampoo, and high temperatures, and have evolved to become resistant to chemicals. They can even block their respiratory passages to avoid being affected by airborne pesticides. Their offspring, called nits, are even tougher. Each has a shell that is so tough that almost nothing can penetrate it.

If you have lice, you don’t manage these parasites or try to keep them segregated. You don’t ignore them. You certainly don’t try to tame them. And if you only deal with some of them, the babies of the ones you neglect will soon mature and hatch more babies and you’ll be back to where you started, totally infested. That’s why the only way to deal with lice is to kill them all, to wage

<sup>2</sup> Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God* (Riverhead Books, 2008), 135-136.

<sup>3</sup> Romans 12:1-2

<sup>4</sup> Paraphrase of Romans 12:1 in *The Message*.

<sup>5</sup> James 2:17

all-out warfare on these invaders until they all are dead and gone.

This is the way the Bible always speaks about sin, urging us to treat it with deadly seriousness. Paul writes in Galatians 5:24, **“Those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.”** Remember how God warns Cain before he kills his brother, Abel, **“sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.”**<sup>6</sup> There can be no compromise.

Of course, if you are like me you have many areas of sin in your life which need to be killed off or mastered. It’s interesting then that Paul zeroes in on two of those areas in this passage, our sexuality and our speech. In verse 5 he names **“sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry).”** All these are different ways of saying the same thing, that it is our tendency to take God’s good and beautiful gift of sexuality and seek to gratify good and natural desires in unnatural and unhealthy ways, particularly outside of the God-given boundary of marriage. Even greed, the last thing on Paul’s list, relates, because greed is the desire to possess more and more. It’s been said that lust is the craving for salt in a person who is dying of thirst.<sup>7</sup> And this is what the desire for sex outside the healthy boundaries God has provided does for us, the more you get the more you want. It just never satisfies, making you more and more thirsty.

The other area James mentions is speech, commanding us in verse 8, **“But now you must get rid of all such things – anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another...”** It’s been pointed out that one of the ways to distinguish humans from other creatures on earth is our speech. What sets us apart from animals is our ability to use words to communicate ideas, express personality, and enter into dialogue. I know that one of you will want to point out to me that whales talk to each other, but we all know the difference. Our speech is one of the things that makes us uniquely human. Come to think of it, so is our sexuality, since sex for us is more than just a biological necessity to propagate the species. Sex has a deeply powerful unifying effect on two people. The Bible says it makes two people into “one flesh.”<sup>8</sup> It makes sense, then, that Paul would mention these two uniquely human areas as places where sin most easily roots itself.

Again, sex and words are both beautiful gifts from God. It’s tragic when the church gets this wrong, especially regarding sex. Country singer Butch Hancock once famously said that he grew up in church environment where he learned that “sex is bad and dirty and nasty and awful, and you should save it for the one you love.”<sup>9</sup> Nothing in the Bible communicates this, but instead the scriptures speak openly and celebrate the beauty and joy of human sexuality.

But sex, just like words, has two sides. Both are powerful and can be used for incredible good in this world. But both can also be used in ways that cause great pain and damage, even violence. Sex is like fire, a gift that can do remarkable good to heat your home or run your car, but can also be terribly destructive when it is taken outside of its bounds. Words are like a knife, which in the hands of skilled surgeon can save a life, but in the hands of an angry young man, as we just saw in Davis, can lead to tragic consequences. C.S. Lewis once pointed out how the devil is powerless to come up with new desires, but can only take the good desires (like sex and speech) that God has put in us and twist them for evil purposes.<sup>10</sup>

This is why God hates sin, which might be defined as taking God’s good gifts and using them for selfish or evil purposes. And God’s profound hatred of sin *in us* is rooted in his profound love *for us*. If you’re a parent, why do you hate the destructive habits and tendencies you see in your own children? Because you love them! It’s no different with God. He hates sin because he loves us. Paul speaks to this in verse 6 when he writes, **“One account of these (i.e. our sin) the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient.”**

The Greek word translated “wrath” here is the word *orgē*. It literally means “to swell up to constitutionally oppose”. The implication is that wrath of this kind is not anger that explodes. God doesn’t see our sin and lose control of his temper. That’s not what wrath is. Instead, God’s wrath is a settled disposition against sin which swells up out of God’s good and loving nature, a righteous antagonism towards all that is unholy. And again, it’s connected to God’s love. In fact, divine wrath is a function of divine love. Because God loves his creation, he hates that which does damage to it.<sup>11</sup>

Imagine I had an adult child who continued to take the good things I was giving him and used them in selfish and abusive ways which were causing great harm to

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 4:7

<sup>7</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (Harper & Row, 1973), 54.

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 2:24

<sup>9</sup> Cited by Leonard Sweet, *Learn to Dance the Soul Salsa* (Zondervan, 2000), 163.

<sup>10</sup> I wish I could find the reference for this. If you know it, pass it on to me!

<sup>11</sup> I’m indebted here to Sam Storms, *The Hope of Glory* (Crossway Books, 2007), 237-240.

both himself and those around him. Would you criticize me if my response was this sort of wrath, not the loss of control in anger, but intentional, measured steps to cut off my son from these good gifts, and even to put up a boundary in our relationship, all with the ultimate hope that these steps might bring him back around? And wouldn't it be right to criticize me if instead I did nothing, and just kept looking the other way and allowing the abuse to continue? As Dietrich Bonhoeffer once put it, "Nothing can be more cruel than the leniency which abandons others to their sin. Nothing can be more compassionate than the severe reprimand which calls another Christian in one's community back from the path of sin."<sup>12</sup>

We understand this when it comes to one another. It's a mystery to me therefore why so many people have such a hard time understanding that God is no different in his wrath towards the sin which harms his beloved children. This love which motivates his wrath towards sin, naturally then motivates his desire to kill the sin which he sees in us. But to do so he needs not only our permission, but also our cooperation. It's with this in mind that Paul, here in these verse and in the verses that follow which Laura will cover next week, uses the analogy of clothing. God wants to strip off the old clothes of sin, and outfit us with the new clothes of righteousness.

Many scholars believe that what Paul had in mind here was the way people were baptized in the early church. After a long period of instruction and preparation, new believers, usually on Easter morning, would be stripped naked of their old clothes before they entered the water. After begin baptized, they would then come out of the water, receive an anointing, and then be given a fresh, white garment to wear.<sup>13</sup> All of it was to symbolize that it is Christ's desire to strip us of every sin and habit that hinders us in life, and give us a whole new way of living in his grace. Though it's a process that takes a lifetime, Christ is essentially saying to his followers, let me undress you from those dirty rags and put more fitting clothes on you, clothes worthy of royalty, which is what you are as beloved sons and daughters of the King of Kings.

I can't help but think of that powerful scene in C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia*, when Eustace Scrubb, the arrogant, whiny, and self-absorbed boy who almost nobody can stand, becomes a whole new person with the help of Aslan the lion, the Christ figure in the books. While exploring an island one day, Eustace discovers a

dead dragon's lair full of treasure. What he doesn't know is that it's a magical trap, so that when he tries to hoard the treasure for himself, his greed turns him from a little boy into a terrible dragon. When his friends discover what has happened to him, to his surprise they begin to treat him with an undeserved compassion and kindness that eventually begins to melt his cold dragon heart. Though still a terrible beast on the outside, a brand new little boy begins to emerge on the inside. Still, he can't shed his hideous dragon skin.

That's when Aslan meets him one moonless night and takes him to a pool of water. The great lion asks Eustace to undress himself and step into the pool. To his amazement, as he begins to scratch at his skin it begins to peel off, like the old skin of snake. But underneath one layer of dragon skin is just another layer of dragon skin, each one tougher than the last. That's when Aslan says to him, "You will have to let me undress you." And though Eustace is terribly afraid of the lion's great claws, he lies flat on his back and lets him do it. The undressing was not quick, and it was very painful, but it also had a certain pleasure to it, in the same way you might feel if you pull the scab off a very sore place.

Listen to how Eustace describes what happens next,

Well, he peeled the beastly stuff right off – just as I thought I'd done it myself the other three times, only they hadn't hurt – and there it was lying on the grass: only ever so much thicker, and darker, and more knobbly-looking than the other [skins] has been. And there was I as smooth and soft as a peeled switch and smaller than I had been. Then he caught hold of me – I didn't like that much for I was very tender underneath now that I'd no skin on – and threw me into the water. It smarted like anything, but only for a moment. After that it became perfectly delicious and as soon as I started swimming and splashing I found that all the pain had gone. And then I saw why. I'd turned into a boy again...After a bit the lion took me out and dressed me."<sup>14</sup>

With new clothes, of course.

C.S. Lewis says at another point, "After the first few steps in the Christian life we realize that everything which really needs to be done in our souls can be done only by God."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (Harper, 1954).

<sup>13</sup> Laurence Hull Stookey, *Baptism: Christ's Act in the Church* (Abingdon Press, 1982), 103-104.

<sup>14</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (Harper Trophy, 1952), 116.

<sup>15</sup> Source unknown.

This process of undressing and dressing is what Christ wants to do in your life, though it will take your whole life to do the job. But again, he will not do it without your permission and cooperation. And I think that the only reason you will ever give permission and cooperate, is because you have come to know that Christ can be trusted. Why else would you lay yourself so vulnerable before him?

Paul alludes to this in verse 10 when he says that that our new life is **“being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator.”** These may be the key words of the whole passage. Trust is rooted in knowledge. Right? As we come to know Christ more and more, we realize that not only is he the sovereign Lord over creation, all-knowing, all-present, and all-powerful, but that he is also good and loving, in fact goodness and love embodied. If God were evil, you wouldn’t trust him, even though he was still God. But since he is not only God, sovereign in all things, but also good and loving, we can trust him because we know he not only wants what is best for us, *but has the power to bring it about.*

This invitation to God’s best life, by the way, is for everybody. That’s Paul’s point in verse 11, when he lists all these different categories: **“Greek and Jew, circumcises and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, enslaved and free…”** In Paul’s day, that covered just about all the categories. There’s a Bruce Springsteen song called *Land of Hope and Dreams* that I love. It might be my favorite Springsteen song. The refrain describes a train that is bound for glory, the land of hope and dreams:

*This train carries saints and sinners  
This train carries losers and winners  
This train carries whores and gamblers  
This train carries lost souls<sup>16</sup>*

In other words, this train is open to anybody who is willing to get on board. That includes you, by the way, because **“Christ is all and in all.”** That’s how Paul puts it. From now on everybody is defined by Christ, everyone is included in Christ if they are willing. Nothing and nobody is outside of his grace, his joyful willingness to take our lives and remove everything in us that weighs us down and cuts us off, and put it all to death so that he then might make all things in us new, and fill us with of the life he has always wanted for us.

Amen.

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<sup>16</sup> Listen to a live version here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sWvdFIU6hZg>

## The Next Step

### *A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application*

1. Read Colossians 3:5-11 again. What stands out to you? What do you notice?
2. Paul says we should put sin to death. What do you think this means?
3. Why do you think God hates sin so much?
4. What is your response when you hear that God is a God of wrath? How does what Dietrich Bonhoeffer says help or hinder your understanding: “Nothing can be more cruel than the leniency which abandons others to their sin. Nothing can be more compassionate than the severe reprimand which calls another Christian in one’s community back from the path of sin.”
5. Jeff used the story of Eustace Scrubb from Narnia, telling how Aslan peeled off his dragon skin and made him into a brand-new boy. Has Jesus ever done anything like this in your life?
6. Paul uses the metaphor of clothing here to talk about how Christ takes off our dirty clothing of sin and puts on new clothes of righteousness (more on this next week!). How does that undressing and dressing actually happen in your life? What part do you think you play?
7. Do you feel like you trust Jesus enough in your life right now to let him remove from your life whatever he wants to remove and add to your life whatever he wants to add? Why or why not?
8. What response is Jesus calling from you after this message? Will you respond?



#### **Table to Table: A Question for kids and adults to answer together.**

*What is sin and why does God hate it so much?*