

Colossians 3:5-17

Another section that begins with “therefore.” And you always ask, “What’s the ‘therefore’ there for?” In this case, we glance back at what Paul just said, and we see that he’s emphasizing the fact that our lives, my life, your life, is hidden with Christ, and that we should set our minds on the things above, on Christ.

In light of that, we turn to our everyday actions. Not so much the religious discussions of what we can and shouldn’t do to honor God (festivals? Sabbaths? visions?), which Paul just discussed, but the nuts and bolts of how to act in this world. If we have been redeemed, if we have died with Christ and have been raised with him, what does this “new man” look like, act like? This is the question Paul looks to answer.

Jesus doesn’t only save. He transforms. Paul pushes the Colossians here to say, “How am I different because of what Jesus has done?” There is a mysterious balance here between our active work (“put on the new self,” he tells them) and our passive work (“the new self is being renewed,” he says), but in any event, we must be different because of Jesus’ saving work. We have died with him, and we are new men.

Therefore, consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry. For it is because of these things that the wrath of God will come upon the sons of disobedience

Our life is secure with Jesus, so it is only logical to treat as dead the acts of the earthly body. There has been a definitive break with the past, conversion has happened, so why go back and act out the sinful, destructive ways of the old man? Act like the family to which you now belong. The Greek literally translates “put to death the members” or “mortify the members.” The flesh is dead. Don’t try and resuscitate it. The enemy has been defeated but tiny pockets of resistance remain within us. How do you continue to put the flesh to death? Starve it. Fight it. Use the Spirit to defeat it (Romans 8:13).

This list of sins that Paul gives is certainly not meant to be exhaustive, and notice that while the first act is a physical act, the others become more and more subtle, each harder to detect from the outside than the last. Sin is hidden deep within us, and is ultimately a heart issue rather than an action issue (cf. Mark 7:21-23). Also, notice the connection to idolatry. The first of the Ten Commandments is “Thou shalt have no other gods before me,” and Paul ties these “everyday” sins to that pre-eminent sin. Greed, for example, places money, possession, and influence all as objects of worship and desire before the Lord. All sin, in a similar way, is ultimately idolatry.

A final reason to put these actions to death (beyond the logic reason and the idolatry reason) is that these actions incur the wrath of God. Paul does not allow the reader to take sin lightly, for we live before a holy God who exercises His immense wrath on sin. And yet, as believers, we should read the phrase “wrath of God” and recall that this wrath was put on Jesus. The wrath that we earned was put on Jesus. The wrath that remains “will come upon the sons of disobedience.”

And in them you also once walked, when you were living in them. But now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices.

Paul gives a second list of “old self” actions here, this list dealing with relationships with one another. Notice that these five actions are largely “justifiable” actions. The actions listed previously—immorality, greed, etc.—spring from within our hearts while this second set of actions spring up from us in response to something that another has done. We would like to allow ourselves to be angry, speak abusively to or about another person, but Paul (and the Lord) will have none of it.

And why? Again, because conversion has happened. Yes, you formerly acted like this, just as you were formerly “alienated, hostile in mind, and engaged in evil deeds” (1:21), but now you have laid them aside. You “laid them aside,” so “put them aside” (a classic example of the already-but-keep-doing-it mindset in the New Testament). Look back at Jesus, at chapters 1 and 2 and recall that you are no longer this old man because you have been rescued from the domain of darkness and reconciled to God.

Without this mindset, this recognition of what Jesus has done, what is said here is just weight after weight, more things shackling us with legalism. But with the understanding of how we were redeemed, this list is freeing. Paul, through the Holy Spirit, is identifying the things that keep us in chains. Examine your own experience and see if greed, anger, sexual immorality, and the other sins listed have not enslaved you when you give into them. In addition, we learn here how to say “thank you” to the one who has saved us – by engaging in the actions of the new man.

Finally, notice the powerful assumption here: we’re all sinners. There would be no need to tell people put aside impurity, evil desire, and wrath if believers were perfect. No, Paul makes clear that while we are saved, we are still corrupt individuals who struggle greatly with sins that Jesus has already killed within us. We daily need to put aside these evil practices, and we daily need to exercise grace with the believer next to us who is working to do the same.

And have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him – a renewal in which there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumscised and uncircumscised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all and in all.

Here Paul begins to describe what we have in exchange for the old self with its evil practices. We have received a new self, which is seeing and becoming more and more the person man was created to be – a creature made in the image of God.

One of the truest signs of this renewal is a dropping of cultural, economic, and social barriers. This does not mean that distinctions disappear (Paul deals in Chapter 4 with displaying Christ in your particular setting in life) but rather that we recognize common citizenship in God’s Kingdom and drop all pretenses of rank and worth. Christ is all, that is, the substance of which cultural differences are the shadow, and in all, that is, he is present within believers from every ethnic and economic background.

So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.

Paul counters the list of old self practices with a portrait of the new self. The new self, which was just described as coming from a true knowledge of the image of God, is seen perfectly in Christ. Christ is the new Adam, the one from whom life spreads to all believers (1 Corinthians 15:20-28, 45-49). What does compassion look like? Humility? Bearing with one another? Look at Jesus. (And remember that Jesus himself lives in you, he is your “hope of glory” (1:27). And it is only after we have been chosen by God and given worth as “holy and beloved” children, that we are enabled to put on the new self.)

By way of a quick summary, look at the characteristics Paul lists:

- Compassion—this word implies something that comes from deep within, from the “bowels”
- Kindness—doing good for another at your expense, even to your own hurt
- Humility—considering others more important than yourself (a characteristic alien and ridiculed in the pagan world)
- Gentleness—see Jesus’s comment that “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”
- Patience—this word leads into Paul’s comment on bearing with one another and forgiving one another. When wronged, be long-suffering. (Contrast the old self, who has complaints against others and seeks payment. The new self is wronged as well and yet forgives).

Imagine what the world would look like, what any given community would look like if everyone practiced these characteristics. Universal patience, genuine humility, unselfish compassion. Peace and joy would reign.

But in the world we live in, we struggle. We must be reminded to put on these characteristics. Again, the assumption is, we don't act this way. If you want to be reminded of your sin, look over this list and think, "Was I completely kind this week, helping others to my own hurt? Did I act with all humility?" These omissions are far more deceptive than the more commissioned sins such as immorality.

Finally, notice that ultimately, it is not leadership or boldness or strength or wise planning or shared goals that keeps a community together. It is love.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful. Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through him to God the Father.

The peace of Christ – the knowledge that we have been reconciled to the Father – ought to rule in our hearts, giving us confidence and freedom, hope and joy. At the same time, the peace of Christ – the unity amidst differences among believers – should have authority over our communities, where individuals are reconciled to each other and see each other as co-heirs and members of the same family.

One of the signs of a healthy community is the mutual encouragement that happens between believers. This mutual encouragement is the result of constant association with the word of Christ. The word of Christ – the Gospel he preached, and probably by extension, all the words of Scripture – should be our housemate, the one we are in constant communication with, the one who speaks into any situation where he is needed. When the word of Christ dwells within us, we will teach and admonish with wisdom whether speaking or singing or acting.

One final note. After chapters 1 and 2, one might ask, "What is the proper response to this salvation? God's salvation is so great; what should I do in return?" One answer is found in these three verses. Say thank you. In three consecutive verses, Paul, through the Spirit, calls us to be thankful. We can never repay Christ, and instead, the Lord simply calls us to be grateful for His mercy and grace. Perhaps the truest sign of the new self is simply that more and more, the acts of the believer are at heart a grateful response to his Savior.

Sample Study Outlines

- I. Pray
- II. Context—Who is Paul? Who are the Colossians? What have they been talking about?
- III. Read Passage
- IV. Exploratory Questions
 - a. What do we see of God in this passage?
 - b. What do we see of man in this passage?
 - c. What's the most important word in the passage?
 - d. We're being renewed according to the image of God. Why does that help?
 - e. Spend awhile talking about the old man and the new man. What do these mean? What about people who are believers but don't act like it? Are we really new or just acting different? Connect to Adam in 1 Corinthians 15:20-28, 45-49, perhaps.
 - f. What similarities do you see between the different acts listed here? Any that surprise you? Don't seem to fit?
 - g. Have we turned a hard corner to the practical side of life here? What's the connection here to what Jesus has done for us? I thought we're already rescued? Why all these rules?
- V. Application Questions
 - a. What act(s) of the old self do you need to put off?
 - b. What act(s) of the new man do you need to put on?
 - c. How can you do those things?
 - d. How's your gratitude to God? How can you improve that?
 - e. How does God call you to action through this passage this week?
- VI. Other questions/thoughts
- VII. So what we've seen here is that Jesus is in the business of transformation. Here's how:
 - a. The old self
 - i. What it looks like
 - ii. How to put it to death
 - b. The new self
 - i. What it looks like
 - ii. How to put it on
 - c. All still tied to what Jesus has already done
- VIII. Pray