

Colossians 3:1-17

I like buying my clothes at The Men's Warehouse. I especially like their commercials, "You'll like the way you look, I guarantee it."

Here in this section of Colossians, Paul uses a metaphor of clothing to point us to the reality of who we are in Christ.

It is the privilege and sober responsibility of the church to proclaim the good news of the gospel.

Oddly enough, before Christians can reach the world, they must first leave it. In Galatians 1:4 Paul affirmed that Christ "*gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us out of this present evil age.*" Christians have been raised with Christ, have overcome the world through faith in Christ, and although we exist in this world physically, spiritually we are already citizens of heaven.

Believers **have** been raised up with Christ. The verb actually means "to be co-resurrected." It is an accomplished fact. Believers spiritually are entered into Christ's death and resurrection at the moment of their salvation.

Through their union with Christ, believers have died, have been buried, and have risen with him. By saving faith they have entered into a new sphere. They possess divine and eternal life.

Consequently, Christians have an obligation to live consistently with those realities. Paul delineates the specifics of that obligation in Romans 6:11–19:

"So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. ¹³ Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. ¹⁴ For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. ¹⁵ What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! ¹⁶ Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? ¹⁷ But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, ¹⁸ and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. ¹⁹ I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification."

This new life is real and powerful, but so is nagging sin. Though it no longer is our master, it can still overpower us if we are not presenting ourselves to God as slaves of righteousness.

Unlike the Men's Warehouse commercial, as a Christian, I don't always like the way I look.

When you become sensitive to the struggle with indwelling sin, you may begin to wonder if you are a Christian at all. You may be saying to yourself, "If I belong to Christ, surely I should not be struggling with sin in this way. I should have left this sin behind by now." If you're worried about the struggles you have with thoughts and desires that seem to rise from within you, what we are learning in Colossians should come as a great relief to you. The experience of battling with sin is not a sign of failure. It is the normal experience of an authentic Christian life.

The new life does not mean the battle is ended; the new life means the battle has begun. This is **evidence** that you're a Christian, not a dead fish floating down the river. You have life in you and that's why you're in the battle.

The relentless war against sin in the Christian life is "mortification." It's the same word from which we get "mortal," which means: subject to death or "mortuary" which is a place where the dead are taken. To "mortify" means "to put to death." There are only two references in the New Testament to this word, but it gets to the heart of the conflict every Christian has with sin...

"For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.." Romans 8:13

"Put to death therefore what is earthly in you..." Colossians 3:5

The impulse to sin keeps landing in new ways in your life and it has to be dealt with. Every day, something will happen that could provoke pride, or envy or self-pity in you. Or another situation will arise that might lead you to impatience, ingratitude or sins of the tongue. You have to mortify it as it comes.

Putting sin to death is not a one-time deal. We are always in this business of mortifying the flesh. John Owen said... "Always be killing sin or sin will be killing you."

Paul emphasizes the centrality, preeminence, and sufficiency of Christ throughout Colossians 3:1–4. Look at the terms:

- With Christ
- Where Christ
- When Christ

Why are these four (4) verses placed here? To remind the Colossians believers that they have indeed risen with Christ. This is the path to holiness. It is not legalism, mysticism, or asceticism. It is not philosophy and empty deceit, psychology, human tradition, or the elementary things of this world. It is not plausible arguments that may delude their thinking.

They are to stop the old life they lived before their salvation. Because they possess the eternal life of Christ, their affections have been changed. They must not forget who they are and how they are to live. Their sinful affections are controlled and conquered by the power of Christ and our union with him. Oh, how I wish I had time to spend an entire Sunday morning just exploring our glorious union with Christ.

We are to keep seeking the things that are above. The "things above" are not limited to the future life in heaven. Paul is referring to the new life that believers share with Christ above. This is in direct contrast to the "things that are on the earth."

It indicates a continuous action, not a one time or periodic desire. We should be preoccupied with this desire.

So, how do we begin? Paul tells us in verse two (2). To set our minds is to have this as an inner disposition.

We must not only seek heaven, we must think heaven. Just as a compass points north, so our entire disposition should orient itself toward heaven, where Christ is.

We move on to **verses 5-9** and examine this spiritual apparel. Paul constantly links doctrine and practice in his letters. Since believers share in Christ's death and resurrection, have their lives hidden with him, and will one day be revealed in glory with him, they must kill sin.

To “put to death” means much more than some mental process of “considering it dead.” Believers are to make a decisive resolution to put sin to death, bringing the flesh under subjection to the spirit-filled new life.

Why? How? We will see that in verse 12.

Some misinterpret verse 5. In a similar way that Matthew 5:29-30, “*If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. ...*” and Matthew 18:8, “*And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away...*” have been interpreted as literal.

A common sight in European cities during the Middle Ages was a group known as the Flagellants (I know, I know). They would march through the streets scourging themselves in penance for their sins. Even today there are those who practice these things. I read of a man who wears a belt studded with nails that constantly tear his flesh. His reason was to “kill the flesh”.

Paul would never encourage this, especially since he just condemned this ascetic practice in chapter 2.

In 3:5–11, Paul gives two sample lists of sins to kill. The first list, in 3:5, comprises sins of perverted love; the second, in 3:8–9, contains those of severe hate. The first list begins with acts and progresses to motives, whereas the second begins with motives and progresses to acts. The first list involves personal sins, the second social ones. The first list relates to feelings, the second to speech. In between the lists (3:6–7), Paul gives two reasons for putting sin to death.

In the first list, these personal sins relate to our feelings. Paul progresses backward from the evil act to the underlying motive. Immorality, the evil act, takes place because of impurity. Impurity comes from perverted passion and evil desire, which in turn come from the root sin of covetousness.

When people sin, it is at its basis their doing what they desire, rather than what God desires. That is, in essence, to worship themselves instead of God, and that is idolatry.

The antidote for covetousness is contentment. A contented person will not desire to violate another person sexually, or covet anything that person owns. A person who can say with Paul, “*I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am*” (Phil. 4:11), is not likely to struggle with covetousness. Contentment comes from trusting God. The basis of that trust is our knowledge of him and his purposes for his people as revealed in Scripture.

Contentment is the opposite of covetousness. Whereas the covetous, greedy person worships himself, the contented person worships God.

Attacking covetousness lays the ax to a root cause of sin. When contentment replaces covetousness, the latter cannot give rise to the process that culminates in an act of sin.

And why are we to put to death our sin?

1. Sin brings God’s wrath.

And what is God’s wrath? In his book, “The Attributes of God”, Arthur Pink describes it as, “His eternal detestation of all unrighteousness. It is the displeasure and indignation of divine equity against evil. It is the holiness of God stirred into activity against sin” Wrath is God’s constant, invariable reaction to sin.

Unbelievers will experience the full force of God's eternal wrath. *Because the unbeliever does not have faith in Christ, "the wrath of God abides on him"* (John 3:36).

Because wrath comes "on account of these", believers should have no part in them. Sin brings wrath, not blessing. It never brings true happiness.

2. This sin is part of the believer's past.

Ephesians 2:1-5: *"And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved..."*

The sins in the second list are not so much personal as social; they are committed directly against other people. Reversing the pattern of the first list, Paul begins with the motive and progresses to the evil act.

The term "put them away" connotes the talking off of dirty clothes at the end of the day.

When Jayne and I were newly married, I had a horrible job at a chrome plating company. We would take wrecked steel car and truck bumpers, cut them up, weld the good pieces back together, grind out all the weld marks, and then nickel and chrome plate them so body shops could use them to repair cars. It was filthy work in many ways but the toll it took on clothing was horrible. Jayne would not allow me into the house after work until I had stripped down to my underwear and left the clothes on the porch. The idea of bringing those filthy garments into her clean house was revolting.

In a symbolic way, during Paul's day, believers would come to be baptized, lay aside their old clothes before their baptism and be given a new white robe afterwards. Paul calls upon believers to put aside the remnants of their old life.

Paul warns against a final sin by exhorting believers not to lie to one another. Lying characterizes Satan, not God. **When we lie, we are imitating Satan, not our heavenly Father.** We, of all people, should tell the truth.

What is the **old self**? It is the unregenerate self, the former manner of existence in Adam.

The **new self**, in contrast, is the regenerate self. It is what believers are in Christ. The new self is the new creature Paul refers to in 2 Corinthians 5:17, *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.*"

The Bible views all men as either in Christ, or in Adam. There is no middle ground.

Paul gives the contrast between Adam and Christ in Romans 5:12–21, one of the richest, most profound theological passages in the New Testament. Through Adam came sin and death (vv. 12–14); through Christ comes grace and righteousness (vv. 15–18). Through Adam's disobedience all people were made sinners; through Christ's obedience, people are made righteous (v. 19). Just as it is impossible to be in Adam and in Christ at the same time, so also is it impossible to be or to have an old and new self.

Possession of the new self does bring the believer new life, but not instant spiritual maturity. The flesh will continually dangle the garments of the old self in front of the new man and urge him to put them on. The battle against the flesh will go on throughout this life. The new self is complete, yet has the capacity for growth, just as a baby is born complete and has the ability to grow.

And finally in verse 11 we are reminded that in Christ there is no distinction.

- Greek and Jew refer to racial or national distinction
- Circumcised or uncircumcised refer to religious distinction.
- Barbarian or Scythian reflects a Greek point of view. They are examples of cultural distinction.
- Slave or Free refers to social distinctions.

Verses 12-14

So put on these new clothes.

Most people's behavior is interesting when it comes to clothes. I must admit that I prefer shorts and an oversized t-shirt with my flip-flops. Unfortunately (or fortunately) I can't wear my preference to work. And it is probably a good thing. Most people, including Tim Nixon, behave differently based on what clothes they are wearing. We tend to "act the part" in a sense. I find that in my workplace, our team behaves in a more professional manner when they wear nicer clothes. They also become far more productive. Jayne and I enjoy dressing up for dinner once or twice a year. The mood is completely different when we do.

Paul is, in a sense, telling the Colossians to "Put on your best clothes and act the part." He is telling them to realize who they are and act like it!

Paul begins these two verses by reminding the Colossians of who they are by listing three (3) things:

1. They are chosen ones, elect, not because of their potential, but because of God's sovereign choice.
2. They are holy. When we think of holy we often think of halos or monks walking around. Holy in this sense means, "Set apart for God's specific use."
3. They are God's beloved.

And because they are these three (3) things, they are to clothe themselves appropriately! Your righteous identity demands you clothe yourself with righteous behavior.

Such behavior is the outward manifestation of the inward transformation, and it is the only sure proof that such transformation has taken place. God has chosen believers out of the mainstream of mankind and drew them to himself.

They are different from the world. When believers fail to act differently from the world, they violate the very purpose of their calling.

The list of qualities looks familiar doesn't it; kind of like the fruit of the spirit in Galatians, with love being the belt or suspenders that hold the entire outfit together.

Verses 15-17

Paul concludes his look at the qualities that should mark the lifestyle of the new man by giving three priorities. They are the outermost garments of the new man, those which cover all the others. The new man is concerned with the peace of Christ, the word of Christ, and the name of Christ.

Peace includes both the concept of an agreement, pact, treaty, or bond, and that of an attitude of rest or security. Both aspects are in view here. Objectively, believers are at peace with God: *“Therefore having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ”* (Rom. 5:1). The war between the believer and God is over, and the treaty was paid for by the blood of Christ. Because of that, believers are at rest, and secure. Paul told the Philippians that the *“peace of God... shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus”* (Phil. 4:7).

Rule is used to describe the activity of an umpire in deciding the outcome of an athletic contest. The peace of Christ guides believers in making decisions.

Peace is not only objective and subjective, but also relational. Believers were called to live in peace in one body. Individuals who have peace with Christ and in their own hearts will live in unity and harmony with each other.

The “word of Christ” refers to the revelation he brought into the world, which is Scripture. Peace and thankfulness, as well as unity, love, and all the required virtues, flow from a mind controlled by Scripture. There is that word dwell again. Paul calls upon believers to let the Word take up residence and be at home in their lives. The truths of Scripture should permeate every aspect of the believer’s life and govern every thought, word, and deed.

Having the Word of Christ richly dwell in us produces not only information, but also emotion. It generates psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, and singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

To sum it up, the believer is exhorted to do everything in the name of Christ. The simplest, most basic rule of thumb for living the Christian life is to do everything, whether word or deed, in the name of the Lord Jesus. To do everything in the name of Jesus is to act consistently with who he is and what he wants. Paul expressed the same thought in 1 Corinthians 10:31: *“Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”* Again, Paul reminds that it is always to be done without reluctance or despair or legalistic duty, but with giving thanks to God the Father through him.

To put on the new lifestyle is to put on Christ. That is the obligation of every believer: *“Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts”* (Rom. 13:14). The goal of the Christian life is Christlikeness.

- Determine in your hearts to respond to God's election by responding to others with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.
- Determine in your hearts to respond to God's choosing by responding to others with love.
- Determine in your hearts to respond to God's love, by letting the peace of Christ rule in your hearts and, therefore, your lives.
- Determine in your minds to let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, by meditating on it, memorizing it, learning from it.
- And all of this do in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.