

## Negative Newness

*Colossians: Christ Above All*

By Dr. D. Ralph Davis

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**Bible Text:** Colossians 3:5-11  
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**First Presbyterian Church**  
1324 Marion St  
Columbia, SC 29201

**Website:** [www.firstprescolumbia.org](http://www.firstprescolumbia.org)  
**Online Sermons:** [www.sermonaudio.com/fpcolumbia](http://www.sermonaudio.com/fpcolumbia)

Our Scripture this evening comes from Colossians 3:5-11. Colossians 3, beginning to read at verse 5.

5 Put to death therefore the body parts that are upon the earth: sexual immorality, uncleanness, sensual craving, foul desire, even that covetousness which is idolatry. 6 Because of which things the wrath of God is coming, 7 in which you also once walked when you were living in them. 8 But now you also must put aside all these: anger, rage, malice, slander, filthy talk out of your mouth. 9 Do not lie to one another, having put off the old humanity with its practices, 10 and having put on the new humanity that keeps on being renewed in knowledge after the image of the one who created it, 11 where there is not Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free, but Christ is all and in all.

Sometimes you just rebel against the rules. I know that when you're preaching, you're supposed to stir the interest of folks in the text, you're supposed to hook their concern and gather their attention. One of my professors once said, "Always begin in the secular. Folks aren't necessarily ready to dive right into the text. You've got to pull them in," and so on. But sometimes you just get tired of that. Sometimes we do that sort of thing but sometimes you just get tired of it and I just want to drop right into the text and if you don't want to do that, A. tough; and B. you can go back to sleep. But for those of you who remain and want to look at it, we're looking at Colossians 3 and verses 5 to 11 and the point here is that if Christ is in you, chapter 3, verse 4, or if Christ is your life, as he says in chapter 3, verse 4, then there are certain things that go by the boards; there are certain things that Paul spells out that shows the difference that Christ makes and especially in what we call negative newness, in what is set aside because Christ is your life; what should no longer have a place because Christ is your life.

Negative newness. But the interesting thing is that we can express negative newness in positive form and so I present that before you tonight. First of all, Christ gives us a new cleanness, verses 5 to 7, a new cleanness. In case you're worried, this will probably be the longest point but let's look at the text and try to develop it. Notice the specific focus here. "Put to death therefore the body parts that are upon the earth," that is, the body parts, your

body parts that are the instrument of sin that do these sort of things. What things? "Sexual immorality, uncleanness, sensual craving, foul desire and that covetousness or even that covetousness which is idolatry."

Now, the first term, sexual immorality, is the word *porneia*. It's a broad term. It covers all forms of sexual immorality: premarital, extramarital relationships; homosexuality; bestiality, the whole gamut of illicit sexual relations. Then uncleanness is a word that has reference also to illicit sex as well as this term we've translated "sensual craving and foul desire." This all has to do with illicit sex and so Paul is underscoring these things and he's doing it in a letter to a church. You say, "I would think better of that," wouldn't you? No, you have to understand that in the world of the first century, these things were rife. One New Testament scholar says chastity was the one completely new virtue which Christianity brought into the world. In the ancient world, he says, relationships before marriage and outside marriage brought no shame and were the normal and accepted practice. The ancient world regarded the sexual appetite as something to be gratified and not to be controlled. Another New Testament scholar speaks of that time as well and says when Paul uses the word "*porneia*," sexual immorality here, you have to understand that there was an enormous problem in the early church, especially among the Gentiles. He says adulterous relationships, men sleeping with their slave girls, incest, prostitution, sacred sexual encounters in the local temples and homosexuality were all a part of everyday life in that culture. There was no pervasive sexual standard with regard to sexual relations. That's the first century. It's our century.

But Christ makes a difference. Christ brings a new cleanness so that's what Justin Martyr, I think it was said when he reflected on the way pagans viewed Christians in the early centuries. He said, "They think us senseless because we worship this Christ who was crucified under Pontius Pilate as God next to the Father. By its fruits they may know it. We who once lived in debauchery now study chastity. Christ gives us a new cleanness," Justin was saying.

Now, what does Paul say to do with this sexual immorality and uncleanness? So he says to kill it. That's a rather radical sort of thing, isn't it, all around them as it was. It was about two weeks ago in prayer meeting that Dr. Thomas referred to the first term here, *porneia*, sexual immorality, and, of course, you recognize the root term of our pornography and so on and just the fact that even in the church and especially in the church in our day, this is an epidemic, a problem of epidemic proportions. So this is not irrelevant at all to us.

You notice how Paul uses this term "covetousness" in verse 5. I don't think he's just talking about run-of-the-mill covetousness, the word actually means "have more; have more and more; never satisfied; and especially have more of what other people have perhaps." This have-moreism, but here the term "even that covetousness" as I would translate it, relates back to those other four terms in verse 5, I think. It's talking about that sexual immorality, uncleanness, etc., that foul desire and so on, all these illicit sexual passions etc. and desires and so on, and it says "even that have-moreism. What kind of have-moreism? That just drools and is controlled by and dominated by illicit sex. That's

what drives it. That kind of covetousness is idolatry. You set up illicit sex as your deity and that takes in all your attention and all your desire and your whole vision. That seems to be what he's getting at.

So we're right back at a time when the people of Israel came into the land of Canaan and met the Canaanites, 1400 BC; the Canaanites, who thought that both their life and their worship resided between their legs. Here we are. That's it and that's the situation in which the church at Colossae was and which we are, and we have this matter, especially of the manifestation of this even in the church in the scourge of pornography today.

There is a book service that was advertising a book, Christian book about pornography in the church and they had sources for these various figures but they said 36% of pastors have visited a porn site this year; 50% of Christian men are addicted to pornography; 90% of 8-16 year olds have viewed porn online. And what does Paul say? Put it to death. In other words, I don't know if we realize that the violence of that verb in verse 5: be Christian killers. Put it to death. It's not like Paul is saying, "Now you just pull yourself up into this cleanness by your bootstraps," it's all presupposes chapter 3, verse 1, that you've been risen together with Christ so therefore in union with Christ you have his resurrection power and you put this stuff to death. You kill it. That you walk in newness of life and in the power of Christ and you put it to death.

Paul is picking up on the teaching of Jesus, isn't he? You remember what Jesus said in Matthew 5:27-28 when he was speaking of the seventh commandment, "You've heard it been said that you shall not commit adultery but I say to you that everyone who looks on a woman in order to lust after her has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Then he goes on to say, "If your right eye causes you to sin, rip it out and throw it from you. It's better that one of your members should perish than your whole body be thrown into hell," and so on. You see, when he talked about the right eye and so on, it was in the context in Matthew 5 anyway, of the matter of lust, sexual lust.

Now, you say, "Well, what does Jesus mean? Does he mean I actually have to do that?" Well, no he doesn't. Why? Well, that would be too easy. Now, you know Jesus doesn't mean that with wooden literalness because you could rip out your right eye and you could lust with your left eye and then you could rip out your left eye and you could lust with your imagination. So Jesus doesn't mean that you do this literally. What does Jesus mean? He's saying that you should be willing to go to any extreme, to make any sacrifice, to undergo any deprivation and hardship to avoid sin, especially unlawful lust. It's not that Jesus forbids all lust. He wants you to lust after purity. But you take whatever measures are necessary in order to kill it.

Steve Brady, I referred to him a week or two ago, he's a Bible college principal in the United Kingdom and he was speaking, passing on a little information of a conversation he had with another Bible college principal in Britain. They were talking and this other college principal was telling Mr. Brady that when his college offered free internet access to all their students there were several students that came to him and said, "Please don't do that. We have enough temptation already." What were they doing? "We'll be deprived

of that. We would rather not have that in order to avoid sexual immorality or the temptation to it." Plucking out their right eye, as it were.

Now, what are the incentives for this new cleanness? Well, one of them is divine wrath, verse 6; and another one is human memory, verse 7. Notice what Paul says there in verse 6. Why should you put to death sexual immorality, etc? Well, "Because of these things," mentioned in verse 5, "the wrath of God is coming." It sounds archaic, doesn't it, for Paul to say that? I mean, you can imagine that in USA today sometime there must be a survey referred to that will say that the majority of Americans see nothing wrong in premarital or extramarital sex or in homosexual sex between consenting adults. And Paul still says, "Because of these things, the wrath of God is coming."

Now, he probably refers to the wrath of God at the judgment on the last day but that may not be all of it. He may also be referring to the wrath of God that works as he spells out in Romans 1:18-32, that is, that there's a wrath of God that works in those who practice such things as they're destroying themselves in their bondage to such practices, and in that God hands them over to do what they so insistently and presciently want to do and do do. He hands them over. The wrath of God is already at work in this stuff.

Now, that's an incentive of fear. Nothing wrong with that. If the fear is grounded in truth, nothing wrong with that. "Because of this, the wrath of God is coming." But there is also another incentive and that's human memory, verse 7, which Paul says, "in which thing you also once walked when you were living in them." Now, that's really an incentive of gratitude. I mean, that's a bad memory and that's a sad memory. This is the kind of thing, this is the way you folks live, but you don't live...I mean, you once walked that way. It's no longer. Jesus has given you a new cleanness and they have that memory and that moves them to gratitude in order to continue to put these things to death.

Don McClure was a Presbyterian missionary in the Sudan back in the 40s, 50s, 60s, etc. and one time he had one of his Christian men of the tribe there in Sudan who came to him and brought his son to him. His son had been bitten by a very poisonous puff adder while he had been fishing and so this Christian tribesman brought him to McClure. McClure wasn't a medical doctor but like a lot of missionaries, he did a lot of medical stuff to the limit of his ability. So the father brought him and the father said, "If the medicine will not help him, then our prayers will, and if he dies, our lives are in God's hands." Well, McClure said, "The boy is going to get well," and he said he teased the father by saying, "Why didn't you kill a sheep and pour the blood on your son as you would have done three years ago?" And he said that the man raised his hands above his head in horror and said, "That was in other days! Now we only believe in the blood of Jesus!" In which you once walked, but no more. There is an incentive of gratitude because Christ has given you a new cleanness.

Then secondly, Christ also gives you a new calm, c-a-l-m. Verse 8, "But now put aside also, you also must put aside all these." Now notice the "put aside," so he goes from the image of putting to death, killing, to setting aside, like taking off clothes and setting them aside. "You also must put off all these: anger, rage, malice, slander, filthy talk out of your

mouth." Now, some scholars take that last phrase, "out of your mouth," and connect it with all five of those terms as if they're all expressions of speech. That probably won't wash but at least the "out of your mouth" goes with the "filthy talk" and probably with the "slander," but the others perhaps not so much.

But what you see here in verse 8 in these matters is that you have wrath and you have bursts of rage, you have mouthing slander, you have abusive talk or foul talk out of their mouth, that indicates a person who is not under control. Now, the malice is a more undercover thing that drives, you might say, the slander or the rage and so on, it's not so obvious, but most of these matters in verse 8 are expressions of explosiveness and so on. Here's a man, here's a woman who is not under control and that seems to be the common element here.

Now, these are not racy elements in verse 8 like in verse 5. These aren't the raunchy sins, these are the more mundane sins that need to be put off, but how far we often are in giving evidence that there's been a change in this regard. Some of us fight with this often.

Now, I mentioned Steve Brady just a moment ago and he tells of a California minister who was to speak at a prayer breakfast and he was really wound up about it and he tended to have a short fuse anyway and to be one of those fellows who was always living on the edge, that sort of thing. And there was a Senator that was supposed to be at this prayer breakfast and so he was rather pleased about that and he was getting ready to go and when he came out to get in his car, he noticed he had a flat tire. So he changed the tire but then he noticed after he did that that he got some tire dirt and so on on his off-white suit so he had to go in and change that. After he changed that, he noticed that he had cut himself shaving earlier in the morning and that the blood had dribbled down onto his shirt so he had to change his shirt. Well, by the time, you know, if you're kind of edgy anyway, by the time you get in the car, you're really keyed up and so on.

He was becoming late. He was going to be late and so he took off and was flying down the highway when out of nowhere comes one of those motorcycle California highway patrolmen and pulls him over, and when he pulls him over, he lets down the window and he says, "Just give me the ticket, officer. Just give me the ticket. I was really going so fast. I was probably going even faster than you could imagine so just give me the ticket. I'm really in a rush." The officer says, "Cool down, sir. Take it easy." He said, "No, no, you don't understand. Give me that ticket! Give me that ticket now! I confess it!" The officer said, "Well, calm down, sir. Calm down." He said, "No, you don't understand, I have a really important meeting I've got to get to!" The officer persisted, "No, calm down." He said, "No, no, sir!" Then the highway patrolman said, "Can I just give you a piece of advice? I used to have days like you but three months ago I became a Christian." Sometimes there can be so little evidence that Christ has brought any change at all.

But does God indeed stoop down and deal with us in these kinds of matters like in verse 8? Well, yes he does. Sometimes sudden and sometimes with a struggle in someone. There was a man in Martyn Lloyd Jones congregation in Wales back in the 1930s who was converted to Christ. His name was William Thomas. He was up in his 60s or 70s and

he was a nasty fellow. He had a foul mouth and he was drunk a lot of the time. Sometimes after he got done doing his buying and selling, he would be so stoned that he would just be laid out in his cart and his pony would pull the cart home and so on and there he was. Other fellows in the pub didn't even want to drink with him. You'd think that if anywhere you might get fellowship and camaraderie it might be in a village pub but no, nobody wanted to drink with William Thomas because he was a scuzzball.

And he went to the evening service, of all things, one night. He heard the Gospel and he was converted. That was astounding, it seemed like. And then, though, a huge problem presented itself to him and no one else in the congregation or around him knew about it but he was driven almost to the point of despair because, you see, everything in which...every time he spoke through all his life, he was used to using in every sentence profanity and foul talk and so on, and to say a sentence without being profane or dirty or abusive was just foreign to him. Then when he would do it, after he was converted, he would be so stricken with guilt it would come out and then he would be so taken with misery and despair and so on. You say, "Well, why didn't he seek help?" Oh, he was probably, Mrs. Lloyd Jones tells the story and she says he was probably so ashamed. It was all bottled up to himself.

Then there came a day when he was gathering his clothes one morning in order to get dressed and as he gathered up his clean clothes and so on, he couldn't find his socks. So he opened the bedroom door and he hollered to his wife, "I can't find the blank socks! Where are the blank things?" And as soon as he did that, as soon as he heard himself, a great horror came over him and he fell back on the bed in a paralysis of despair and he cried out aloud, "O Lord, cleanse my tongue! O Lord, I can't ask for a pair of socks without swearing! Please have mercy on me and give me a clean tongue!" As Mrs. Lloyd Jones writes, "As he lay there and as he got up from that bed, he knew that God had done for him what he could not do for himself. His prayer had been heard and from that day, there was not a profane or filthy word that came out of his mouth." Jesus gave him a new cleanness and a new calm. God's script may be different for you, it may be sudden and abrupt, or it may be gradual and agonizing, but as you struggle on in Christ Jesus, you are able to find deliverance and Jesus can give us a new calm and a new control.

But then, thirdly, Christ gives us a new candor, verses 9 and 10. "Don't lie to one another, having put off the old humanity with its practices and having put on the new humanity that keeps on being renewed in knowledge after the image of the one who created it." A new candor. Now, you have two things here: you have the requirement, "don't lie to one another," and you have the rationale in the rest of verses 9 and 10 because, I think it's a causal thing there, because you've already put off, the idea of stripping off clothing and putting on clothing, you've stripped off the old humanity and you've put on the new humanity. Now, your translations will vary. Some have the old self and the new self. Some have the old nature and the new nature. It's really the old man literally and the new man. I think what Paul is speaking of here is an old humanity and a new humanity and in Christ there's a new humanity that he gives you and you put that on and as you do that, what goes with it is a new candor.

Don't lie to one another. Don't you find that strange that he would give you a command like that, don't lie to one another, that is, to fellow believers? Surely we wouldn't lie to one another, would we? Well, let me give you a scenario and it's slightly exaggerated but perhaps you'll get the sense of it. Turn your imagination lights on and assume there's a woman here at First Presbyterian Church and she loves professional wrestling. You know, that stuff where they kind of write the script and these fellows who show you what steroids can do come on and they beat each other over the back with steel chairs. You've maybe seen clips of it on tv or something. Well, this woman loves professional wrestling and there's a professional wrestling card coming to Columbia, South Carolina, so she has an extra ticket and she calls up another woman in her church circle and she says to you, "I've got this extra ticket for this professional wrestling card on Thursday night and I just wondered if you might like to go with me? You know, Junkman Jimmy is going to fight The Crusher and it ought to be great and I just thought you would maybe perhaps like to come with me?" And so you say, well, you think, "I knew I made a mistake in going to that circle." But then you back off and you say, "Oh, I would really love to go but, you know, my husband, Gary, well, his father lives down by Orangeburg and he lives out in the country and he rides his bicycle down the lane about a quarter or half a mile to pick up his mail everyday and his bicycle is broken and he wanted Gary to come down there and fix it and Thursday night is the only night we have free and I have to go with Gary because when he drives back, he falls asleep when he drives at night. I really hate to miss it!"

Now, why do we have to do that? Why can't you just say, "You know, that's very kind of you to think of me. I wonder why you thought of me, but that's very kind of you to think of me but that professional wrestling stuff just doesn't turn me on and I wouldn't be a good companion for you so I'd rather not." You say, "Well, but, what if her feelings are hurt?" Tough. She's not going to die. It'll be alright. Don't worry about it. But, now I said that it was slightly exaggerated, but that's the kind of thing we'll tend to do with one another. We'll fuzzy everything up. We'll pull the wool as much as we can when we can just have perfect candor. And if Jesus has brought us into the new humanity, we can have the freedom to have that candor.

My father used to tell a story in which I think he told it because he thought it put on display his superior parenting skills, but he used to tell a story of my two oldest brothers. Now, this was long before I was but this really is a true story. My two older brothers were very small. I don't know, they may have been four and two or five and three or something like that, but he took those two boys with him to visit another preacher friend of his, and when they went there, he sat down with his preacher friend and they were talking and the preacher's wife was entertaining my two older brothers. Now, according to my father, he was talking to his friend but he was also multi-tasking, which I find hard to believe knowing him, but he was picking up what the minister's wife was saying and he heard her say to the oldest boy, after a little bit of time went by in their conversation, "Now, Wilson, you like me, don't you?" "No, I don't like you." So she turned to the other brother and said, "Now, Glen, you like me, don't you?" "I don't like you either." And then Pop says when he tells this, "I never rebuked those little boys." That's his parenting skills. "But I think they were right," he said, "I never rebuked those little boys. I didn't tell them,

you know, you mustn't be like that with people, you'll hurt their feelings. You have to be able to tell polite lies sometimes." No, he never told them that that was wrong because it wasn't and Jesus delivers you from all your mincing around and your finding excuses and your covering your tracks with fabrications. Jesus gives us a new candor.

Now then, Jesus also gives us, fourthly, a new community, verse 11. A new community. "Where," verse 11, where is the where? Well, he's talking about that new humanity that Christ has brought into being. "Where there is not Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free, but Christ is all and in all." Now, let's try to notice what Paul is not saying. In verse 11 now, he's expanding on this idea of the new humanity that he mentions in verse 10 and he's describing it. It's as if he says, "God in Christ has brought about a new race, really. But as he does so, when he says there is not Greek and Jew and so on, he doesn't mean that there's actually no one who's really Greek and really Jew. It's not as if he's saying there is no such thing as African American and Caucasian and Hispanic, etc. There are. He's not saying there isn't, there aren't those entities, he would say, "It's right there on your driver's license or your id card. It's there." He's not saying it doesn't exist, he doesn't say you're some kind of neutered person or neutral person or something. No, you are what you are but that doesn't make any difference, that's what he's saying, the body of Christ.

It's a staggering claim, isn't it? You have in verse 11 the major chasms of the biblical world or the New Testament age and so on. Greek and Jew or from a Jew's point of view, circumcision and uncircumcision. Circumcision, the covenant people of God and uncircumcision, the great unwashed masses of pagans and so on. What a huge divide. Barbarians, someone who doesn't speak Greek, sort of like a foreigner. You know, it's always hard, isn't it, they just don't seem to quite belong, etc. A foreigner, a Barbarian. And then a Scythian. The Scythians were folks I think originally from up around the Black Sea. There were tribes. A Scythian was sort of what in Paul's world would be called a redneck; folks that were just kind of beyond the pale of civilization and so on. Scythians and so on. You have all these different types. You have slaves and you have free folks. Yes, it's still on your id card but in the new humanity that Christ has created, it doesn't matter.

Now what you have at the very end of verse 11 though is a huge reality when he says, "but Christ is all and in all." Now, what does that mean? Well, you could translate it, the first "all" is neuter, Christ is all things, "and in all" is masculine, in all people. That means in all his people in this context. He's talking about believers. It means he's in all his people.

What does it mean when he says, "but Christ is all things"? Now, he's not, Paul's not speaking philosophically there. It's not like he's saying, "Christ is all things," as if, you know, the marble of the pulpit or the pad of your pew. He's not talking about what we might call pantheism. He's not speaking philosophically, he's speaking popularly. He's speaking in the way we would normally kind of tend to speak and so scholars will say what he means here is, but Christ means everything or Christ is all that matters." Christ is all things. Christ is all that matters. Or you could say, Christ is absolutely everything and



he is in all his people. That's what makes the new humanity a true new humanity, you might say, and in that new humanity these divisions, these differences, are transcended and they don't really matter because Christ is absolutely everything and in all his people.

Steve M. in his book "Remember Jesus" tells of a time when he was officiating at the Lord's Supper. Now, he's an Anglican so he was distributing the bread and the wine at the front of the sanctuary and in Anglican situations, there were people who would come forward and they would kneel at the communion rail and he said on this one occasion he was struck by the two people that were side-by-side there at the communion table kneeling. The first one was the chairman of a South American bank, a very wealthy and influential man, and next to him was a woman who spent much of her week cleaning the houses of the wealthy in the village. There they were, both knelt, equal in their deed, he says, equal in their trust in Christ, and equally members of his body. A new community.

I think it's very easy for people who are just marginal on a congregation or on the outside looking in to always criticize and say, "Ah, you know, they're all the same and so on," but if you know what it's like on the inside of a congregation a little bit, you know there are some huge differences between us folks and yet we're all in this new community. And I think probably what makes the difference is if we realize for all our differences what we are.

Isaac Watts has a communion hymn that he wrote back in the 1700s.

"Jesus invites his saints  
To meet around his board;  
Here pardoned rebels sit and hold  
Communion with their Lord."

If you remember what you are, you'll never get uppity with other believers. If you remember that you are a pardoned rebel that was guilty of treason and Jesus has brought you to sit at his table and you're a part of that new community, you won't have much room for pride.

So negative newness is big stuff. Christ overcomes our filthiness, verses 5 to 7; he overcomes our fury, verse 8; he overcomes our falsehood, verses 9 and 10; and he overcomes our fragmentation, verse 11. Paul wasn't kidding, Christ is absolutely everything.

*Now, our Father, we give you thanks for the newness that there is in the fellowship of your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, and we would pray, O Lord, that you would grant that more and more it will be obvious that we have been with Jesus and in Jesus because we walk in newness of life. Amen.*