
Principles for Christian Living

Colossians 2:20-3:11

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Christ is the preeminent one. Christ is the sufficient one.

In the first fifteen (15) verses of this chapter, Paul argued that Christ is the sufficient answer to philosophy. The truth of Christ shows philosophy to be worthless – indeed dangerous.

In the remainder of the chapter, Paul argues that Christ is the sufficient answer to ritual. Ritual attempts to add something to the person and work of Christ. Paul proves that ritual is of no value in what it attempts to do.

Philosophy aims at the head.

Ritual has to do with the heart.

Three Examples of Empty Religious Ritual (2:16-23)

Let's go back for a quick moment and review those ritualistic additions to the gospel that we saw last week.

Legalism, described in verse 16-17, is the religion of human achievement. Legalists base *spirituality* on Christ plus human works. Legalism makes conformity to manmade rules the measure of spirituality. Believers, however, are complete in Christ, who has provided complete salvation and forgiveness. Therefore let no one pass judgment on you based on their legalistic law.

Legalism is dangerously deceptive, because inwardly rebellious and disobedient Christians, or even non-Christians, can conform to a set of external performance standards or rituals. Oprah, Dr. Phil, AA, even the books filling shelves at the “Christian Bookstore” can all get one to change their behavior – but they cannot change the heart.

The dietary laws, festivals, sacrifices, and Sabbath day worship were all things which are a mere *shadow* of what was to come; but the *substance* belongs to Christ. A shadow has no reality; the reality is what makes the shadow. Jesus Christ is the reality to which the shadows pointed and were thus, fulfilled. Dick Lucas writes, “To discover all that God has for his people in these last days one must be in Christ. And that is all.”¹

Mysticism (vv 18-19) is the pursuit of a deeper or higher **subjective** religious experience. It is the belief that spiritual reality is achieved apart from the human intellect. It looks for truth internally, weighing feelings, intuition, and other internal sensations more heavily than objective Biblical data. Mysticism ultimately draws its authority from a self-authenticated light rising from within.

¹ R.C Lucas, *The Message of Colossians and Philemon*, 114.

There is a tendency in our human nature to move from objectivity to subjectivity—to shift the focus from Christ to experience. This has always intimidated weak believers and threatened the church.

Christ is all sufficient, “seeing that his divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and excellence” (2 Pet. 1:3).

An **ascetic** (vv 20-23) is one who lives a life of rigorous self-denial.

The church has been challenged for centuries by those who advocated poverty or mutilation as a means to spirituality.

Asceticism is useless in that it focuses attention on things that all perish. There is no spiritual value in keeping human precepts and teachings.

The reason for asceticism’s worthlessness is seen in 2:23. Asceticism might make a person *appear* spiritual, but it serves only to gratify the flesh. It is a vain attempt to appear more holy than others.

Commenting on the futility of asceticism, the great nineteenth-century Scottish preacher Alexander McClaren wrote, “Any asceticism is a great deal more to men’s taste than abandoning self. They will rather stick hooks in their backs and do the ‘swinging poojah’ than give up their sins and yield up their wills. There is only one thing that will put the collar on the neck of the animal within us and that is the power of the indwelling Christ.”²

Chapter 3

I used to like buying my clothes at The Men’s Warehouse. I especially liked their commercials, “You’ll like the way you look; I guarantee it.”

Here in this section of chapter 3 of Colossians, Paul uses a metaphor of clothing to point us to the reality of who we are in Christ.

Our Affections (3:1-4)

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.

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

² Alexander McClaren, *The Expositors Bible*

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 an **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 must 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.

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, but we must also think heaven. Just as a compass points north, so our entire disposition should orient itself toward heaven, where Christ is.

Spiritual Apparel (5-11)

We move on to verses 5-9 and examine 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.

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 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? (6, 7)

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.

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.

Reflect and Respond

1. Paul's message to the Colossians is also a warning to us. We are not to be influenced by false human philosophy, legalism, mysticism, or asceticism. Those are but "broken cisterns that can hold no water" (Jeremiah 2:13).

We must hold fast to Christ, in whom we have been made complete.

2. The Christ of the Bible must be the center of our message. What else do we have to offer the world?
 - If people are looking for something to join, they can join the YMCA.
 - If they are looking for a place to go, they can buy a ticket to see the Dragons at 5/3 Field.
 - If they want good music, they can listen to the Dayton Philharmonic.
 - If they want to listen to a lecture, they can take night class at Sinclair.
 - If they want to meet people, they can join a bowling league or run the Turkey Trot.
3. The answer to the quest for Christian living is not found in the approaches of the world, or even religious systems. It is in recognition of who Christ is and what he has provided. Only when the believer understands and is convinced that Christ has furnished everything he needs (2:9-13) and then trusts him for the transforming power to walk in him (2:6-7), can he make true spiritual progress (2:19).