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Colossians 3:5–11

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# EARTHLY WAYS TO ABANDON

*SERIES: THE CHRIST-FORMED CHURCH*

When I moved to California after graduating from college, everything I owned fit into my car. I wanted to travel light. But along the way I began to accumulate things necessary for life, home, and family. Now, many of these things are no longer necessary or useful and my constant goal is to get rid of things and lighten the ship once again. As my dad used to say: “We are selling not buying.” But, as many of you know it isn’t easy throwing things out. My attic attests to that fact. Many of us rent storage sheds because we just can’t part with our “things.” It takes a determined, serious, ruthless effort to clear the decks.

Similarly, as we journey through life we pick up behaviors here and there, not all of them useful or necessary. Many are actually damaging and unhealthy. But we can tend to hold onto them and store them in our attics and closets. These behaviors are the ways of the world, ways that seem natural, ways accepted by society but inconsistent with the life of the believer. Some of these behaviors we picked up prior to becoming a Christian and we have a hard time throwing them away. Dealing with these issues isn’t pleasant or easy. But if we are to live consistent with who we are in Christ, then drastic measures are required. Our text this morning isn’t a “feel good” text but if we listen and obey it can result in greater freedom. Our text is Colossians 3:5–11:

**Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all. (Colossians 3:5–11)**

Beginning with Chapter 3 Paul begins to talk about how we live or walk in Christ, what Paul exhorted in 2:6. The “therefore” in verse 5 refers to this transition in the letter and reminds us that how we live is based on the foundation that Paul has laid out previously in the letter. Our life in Christ begins with a dramatic transformation. We are transferred from the kingdom of the world into the kingdom of God, from darkness into light, from death to life. Even if you have not had a dramatic conversion experience, you have had a dramatic transformation.

At the heart of this transformation is our complete union with the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. We have died with Christ and we have been raised with Christ. Our life is hidden with Christ in God and we look forward to the second coming

when our life will be revealed in glory. We are a new creation with a completely new identity.

These truths are foundational to how we live. If we do not keep the foundation at the heart of our thinking, then we will be susceptible to the kind of teaching that Paul was concerned with for the Colossians – man-made rules, traditions, keeping the law, taking pride in asceticism. These influences take Christ out of the center and keep us from being formed in Christ, Paul’s goal for the believer that he stated in chapter 1. The key to growing and walking in Christ is the centrality of Christ. In Christ all the fullness of deity dwells. He was enough for salvation; he is enough in our maturing process.

Part of growing into maturity is dealing with sinful remnants in our life. Even though we are a new creation and have a new identity, we still have elements of the old nature we inherited from Adam. While we seek the things above, we live on the earth, have a mortal body, and are thus exposed to sinful temptations. We have patterns of behavior ingrained in our flesh that are very natural to us and pockets of rebellion that we do not want to give up. Letting go of our old life isn’t easy.

We might think of earthly ways as our family of origin. As we grow up in our family of origin we learn certain patterns of behavior. When we move out of our home we begin to live differently. But it is amazing how easily we fall back into certain patterns of behavior when we are with our family. Family members know all the right buttons to push. Spiritually, our family of origin is the family of Adam. When we become a Christian we received a new family, the family of God. However, we still retain remnants of our original family. Living in Christ means breaking the old patterns of Adam’s family.

How do we break these patterns? There are two commands – “put to death” and “put off.” In verse 5 Paul literally says to “put to death the earthly members.” “Members” doesn’t refer to the actual members of the human body, but to the sins that those members commit. “Earthly” recalls the phrase “the things of the earth” from verse 2. When something is put to death it is rendered lifeless; it no longer lives. Actions that are put to death no longer exist or have the ability to breathe. This recalls the fact that we have died with Christ, and is similar to Paul’s word in Rom. 6:11: “consider yourselves dead to sin.”

In verse 8, Paul says that we are to “put them all away” or “put off.” The image is the action of taking off clothing. Many times in Scripture behavior or character is referred to as a garment (Job 29:14; Psalm 35:26, 109:29, 132:9; Isaiah 11:5; 59:17; 61:10; Romans 13:12, 14; 1Thes. 5:8). We put off old repulsive habits like a set of worn-out clothes (Rom. 13:12; Ephesians 4:22, 25; Hebrews 12:1;

James 1:21; 1 Pet. 2:1). The next section of text will tell us about the clothing of Christ we are to put on. The word “all” implies totality, not 50 or 70 or 95%, but 100%. Both “putting to death” and “putting away” imply complete eradication and elimination. This is the extent of transformation that God intends for us.

When I married my wife I went through a dramatic conversion. It was not a spiritual conversion but rather a fashion awakening. Liz completely redid my wardrobe. I willingly gave up my platform shoes and checkered polyester pants from the 1960’s. But there were a few items that I wanted to hold onto. One was my favorite shirt, a print with animals on it. I wore it to every party I went to in college. I loved that shirt. One day I took out the garbage, took off the lid from the garbage can, and there was my animal shirt. I couldn’t believe that Liz would throw it out. I argued with my wife but to no avail. This is what Paul is saying. We have to throw out all the earthly ways and let the garbage man take them to the dump in order to walk in Christ. This process is often called purgation or mortification.

What are the earthly ways that we are to put to death and put off? Paul gives two lists of five things. These two lists will be followed by a list of five graces in verse 12. Paul often uses lists like these in his letters (Rom 1:29-31; 1 Cor. 5:11; 6:9-10; Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 5:3-4).

The first list deals primarily with sexual sins – “sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.” Sexual immorality is the Greek word *pornei+a*, from which we get our word pornography. It refers to all sorts of sexual impurities, things that were widely accepted in the Greco-Roman world just like they are accepted in our world.

“Impurity” refers to moral uncleanness, “passion” to shameful passions that lead to sexual excesses, “evil desire” to carnal longings. The list concludes with “covetousness,” or “greediness” which might refer to more general sin. The word means “a desire to have more” and speaks to fact that sin in general and sexual sin in particular might bring temporary enjoyment and satisfaction but it is never enough. Sexual addiction leads to wanting more and more, takes us into darker and darker activities because what satisfied before no longer does. This is true of all addictions. Paul’s list begins with actions and moves towards the inner cravings of the heart. And at the heart of sexual sin is idolatry. Sexual sin is false worship.

There is nothing more powerful than sex. Our society oozes with sensualities everywhere we go. Sex is used to sell everything from dog food to automobiles. This wonderful gift given by God for marriage can lead to devastating damage. Paul in 1 Corinthians reveals the reason sexual sin is so harmful. Paul says that all sin is outside the body except sexual sin, which is inside the body. Sexual sin affects us at the core level. The deep desire for intimacy and oneness can tempt us into places where we become a slave to sex’s power. These things are earthly ways, the ways of the world but they are not even to be named among us. We are to put them to death.

One day when I was a teenager walking down the road I spotted a magazine in the grass. I picked it up to discover it was a Playboy magazine, a treasure for a young teenage boy. Later, I risked life

and limb to steal another magazine from a local pharmacy. Those two magazines lay hidden in my desk in my room. In those days there was no Internet, thank God. Playboy was all we needed. After awhile having those two magazines began to bother me. I was not a Christian at the time and never had any teaching along these lines, but I knew there was something not good about having these two magazines. And so one night I took those two magazines, walked down the end of the block where there was a construction site, and threw them into the dumpster. I walked home with a sense of freedom and a clear conscience. This is what Paul is talking about here. Do whatever it takes to put sexual sin to death.

The second list deals with anger and speech, the emotions and words that come from within us and exit our body through our mouth – “anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk.” Wrath and anger were different to Stoic thinkers but here they are probably synonymous. James tells us to “be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God” (James 1:19–20).

“Malice” means “evil” and refers to an intentional attempt to harm or hurt. This is what sarcasm is – humor at the expense of another. Slander can mean “blasphemy” or “defamation” and is often used as speech directed against God. “Obscene talk” is “filthy speech” or “foul talk.” This might be sexual in nature, using language with double meanings, the kind of language that we listen to on many sitcom and reality television shows. I know I can’t watch sitcoms because I start picking up that way of speaking in a heartbeat. We might note that the fifth item in each list has a qualifying phrase.

And then we get one more additional item. The writer of Proverbs might have said “there are five things to put off, yea six.” The additional piece of clothing to take off is lying to one another and this continues the idea of slander and abusive language.

Our words have great power to give life and enhance relationships. But they also have great power to destroy relationships and community. Paul is concerned about the effect that our speech has on “one another.” Rather than telling lies and talking behind people’s back we are to speak truth to one another in love even though it is often inconvenient, untidy, or embarrassing. Our body language, tone of voice, and words are very important. Therefore we think about what we are going to say before the words come out of our mouth. We filter our words through the Holy Spirit so that they will be uplifting and life giving. One word spoken in wisdom and thoughtfulness can have great power to bring life. But one word spoken in anger or hatred or carelessness can have devastating effects on a community. Just ask anyone who has been verbally abused.

Elsewhere in other letters Paul includes other earthly ways that we are to put to death. I doubt we need much help in discerning the things in our life that God might be speaking to us about right now. The Holy Spirit is pretty good at that. But let me mention some practical things regarding putting to death earthly things.

## EARTHLY WAYS TO ABANDON

1. We all have areas where we can be tempted, patterns that are deeply rooted. We tend to keep these patterns hidden, even being dishonest with ourselves. Honesty would require us to take action.

2. We think that sin will give us pleasure and satisfaction and it does at least initially. This is the allure of sin. We think sin will fill us and satisfy deep heart affections.

3. The pleasure and satisfaction is temporary. Over time sin brings less and less satisfaction but we are convinced that it is the only thing that can fill us.

4. At the heart of sin is a spiritual problem and that is idolatry. We think that God is not good and will not give us the desires of heart. We don't cultivate our interior life and look for life elsewhere. "It is your lack of interior pleasures that makes you go looking for exterior ones."<sup>1</sup>

5. We have a powerful enemy who knows sin well and knows our vulnerabilities well. He doesn't fight fair and always attacks us when we are at our weakest point.

6. Putting to death earthly ways requires ruthless, drastic, aggressive action. Dealing with deep areas of sin calls for premeditated murder. We have to be passionate about Jesus instead of sin, build walls and boundaries when we are strong not weak, get help from others, make a plan and share it with friends. Death isn't pleasant and we have to expect a battle.

7. Paul assumes we can gain freedom from sin, otherwise he would not have given these commands. However, freedom from sin does not come through self-effort but through Christ and the Holy Spirit. Self-effort will only result in sin breaking out in another area, or spiritual pride which is worse than the defeated area of sin. Saying that we can't change is contrary to truth. It means we don't want to change.

Why are we to put to death and throw out earthly ways besides simply getting rid of guilt? One reason is because "on account of these the wrath of God is coming." Some versions add "upon the sons of disobedience" probably to match Ephesians 5:6. This is the same reason Paul gives in Ephesians and Galatians (Eph. 5:6, Gal. 5:21; also 1Thes. 4:6, 1Cor. 5:13). On account of these sinful practices God's holy and righteous judgment is coming upon the world. Therefore, why would we as believers want to have anything to do with these sinful behaviors?

The other reason that Paul gives has to do again with the transformation that has taken place in our lives. He says this here in a couple of different ways. First there is an insightful chiasmic structure in verses 5-8 to highlight this dramatic change (according to the word order in the Greek text):

A in which (things in the 1st list)

B you walked

C once

X when you were living in them

C' now

B' you put off

A' all the things (2nd list)

The center of the chiasm is "when you were living in them" and that is what has changed. Prior to Christ the Colossians lived in sin, including sexual sin, and thus they walked accordingly. Living in sin was their nature and therefore they were predisposed to earthly ways. Now they are living in Christ. They are not living in sin. Therefore they are to put off the old. They no longer have to walk in earthly ways but can walk in newness of life. This is true for us all.

The second way Paul says this is in verses 9-10: "you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator." This refers to what has already happened when the Colossians came to Christ. They have taken off the old man, the old Adam nature, and they have put on the new man, the new Christ nature. Again, undressing and dressing provide the appropriate picture.

Even though there are temptations to sin, we are not two people simultaneously. We are only one. We have already put on the new person. However, we are now being renewed, made new. This is the current ongoing process of being transformed into the image of God according to the pattern of Christ. This is the process of spiritual formation, of growing into maturity.

Adam was created in the image of God. That image was disfigured in the fall. Now we are being re-created into the image that God had intended for us. The context for growth is the knowledge of God, his will and ways, not some false, counterfeit knowledge promising a higher spirituality like the one espoused by the heretics in Colossae.

Again, Paul is appealing to the basic foundation of how completely and thoroughly we have been changed. We have died with Christ and have been raised with Christ. Our life is hidden with Christ in God. For the Christian, to sin is to pretend to be something we are not, to act contrary to our nature. The foundation of what Christ had done for us is the key to everything.

Now, not only is the renewal process and character change taking place in each one of us, but it is also happening corporately, creating a new humanity in the image of God. This is why Paul adds verse 11: "there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all." The extent of this re-creation by God of his people means the total elimination of all social, cultural, racial, and religious barriers. Paul uses a similar list in Gal. 3:28.

Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised refers to the whole of humanity. Greeks were the outstanding representatives among the Gentiles. Both Greeks and Jews considered themselves privileged and each looked down on the other. Circumcision was the stamp or identity marker of being God's people. But this no longer counts for anything. The thing that counts is a new creation (Gal. 6:15). Notice that Greek is listed first.

Barbarian and Scythian is not a contrast like Greek and Jew. The barbarian was a non-Greek, who did not speak the language. The Scythian represents the lowest kind of barbarian who was probably also a slave. The term was used for tribes around the Black Sea from which was drawn a wretched slave class. In the new humanity the lowest of lows has equal standing.

Also, in the new humanity there is equal standing for a slave and a free person. Even though they might have distinctive functions and capacities in society there is no inferiority of one class to another. The same thing is true for men and women. There is no difference in spiritual status.

The new man is a new humanity re-created and reformed in Christ. Christ is all, meaning that Christ is absolutely everything; he is all that matters. Christ is in all meaning that Christ permeates and indwells all members of the new man, regardless of race, class, or background. Christ is supreme. Our life is from him and all things that divide people are abolished in Him. Christ is the center and the new creation is united in him.

Perhaps the greatest motivation we can have for dealing with sinful ways, earthly ways is an elevated view both of ourselves as a new creation in Christ and a vision of the new humanity, the new people of God. We don't eliminate the old earthly ways so that we can feel better about ourselves, although we do. We don't put off sin so that we can engender God's favor and love or guarantee a safe life or have freedom from pain. Yes, God does not want us to be enslaved to sin. He wants us to be holy. But it is about much more than me. Corporately we are the people of God and God's desire is for us to display God's glory and grace to the world and be a light to the nations. This was God's purpose for Israel and this is still his purpose. We are part of something grand and glorious, so why muddle around with earthly idols that do not satisfy when we can be part of God's plan of redemption.

Our text this morning is very appropriate and timely as we enter into holy week and contemplate the events of the cross. It is also appropriate as we come to the communion table this morning and remember the broken body and shed blood of Jesus. When Christ died on the cross we died as well. Through the cross we are set free from the body of sin and death. Sin no longer has power over us. The flesh no longer has power over us. Satan no longer has power over us. As we come this Friday to the Good Friday service, we might symbolically bring with us our earthly ways and leave those things at the foot of the cross. As we come to the table this morning we remember that we live completely forgiven and accepted as a new creation in Christ. Christ is all and in all.

*Now may the Christ who is everything fill us with everything we need for being recreated into the image of God. Amen.*

1. Guigo I in: Bruce Demarest, *Seasons of the Soul*, (IVP Books, Downers Grove, IL, 2001), pg. 27.

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