

## **Colossians: On Things Above Part 4**

### ***Colossians 3:5-11***

**Preached by Rev. Craig T. Smith on August 6, 2023**

#### **Orthodoxy Leads to Orthopraxy**

The young baseball player decided he needed to add a curve ball to his pitch selection. He had a nice fastball that had a little movement up in the strike zone near the plate. He also had a change-up, a slower pitch that the coaches called “off-speed.” This just meant that it looked like a fastball when it was delivered and then it came significantly slower, and a batter would swing early and mis-hit the ball or swing and miss it entirely.

He realized the importance of adding the pitch and now as he got older into high school, his coaches agreed. A curve ball would really be helpful. When the next game came around, the pitcher tried to throw a curve ball. Sadly, his belief that adding a curve ball would be helpful was as far as he had gotten. He had not actually learned to throw the pitch. Just believed with all of his pitching heart that he needed to add it in to the rotation.

He had not taken the steps to be coached up on how to throw one. He had not spent time watching films of pitchers who knew how to throw it. And he did not spend hours and hours and hours of practice learning how to grip the ball and then how to throw the pitch. It was a case of right belief not necessarily leading to right behavior.

In the church world, we call this “orthodoxy leading to orthopraxy.” Basically, that means that the biblical principles we learn connect us or bind us to godly living. It is a belief that many Christians hold. Doctrine demands duty. Creed determines conduct. Facts demand acts. Orthodoxy leads to orthopraxy. And I agree to with the concept. Good theology matters. Jesus was clear that “you shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.” (John 8:32)

The connection between correct belief and correct living is crucial. However, for many Christians, that phrase has become an empty promise. “Orthodoxy leads to orthopraxy” lands in their hearts with this understanding: “Your faithfulness to God will come naturally if you just believe the right things.” It isn’t enough to know the truth. We must go further and desire or want the results from the Scripture’s teaching. We must desire truth’s end of transformation in our lives.

In Colossians 3:5-11, the Apostle Paul begins the study of practical application concerning the incredible and vast theology that he has laid out in chapters 1 and 2. He has carefully revealed the beauty that is found in truth about Jesus. And now we see the contrast between our ugliness and His beauty. Standing between Jesus and ourselves are these little ugly gods and Paul begins to reveal and deal with. Paul is giving us a pathway towards obedience, to leave the ugly idolatry of our sinful old selves behind in exchange for the beauty of what Jesus can be in and for us. And just like a pitching coach teaches pitchers how to throw curve balls, Paul will teach his readers how to live a life of faithful obedience tied to the amazing theology he has laid out for them. I invite you to those verses this morning. (read text)

### **Out with the Old (vv.5-9a)**

*Therefore, put to death what belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desire, and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, God's wrath is coming upon the disobedient, and you once walked in these things when you were living in them. (vv.5-7)*

Jesus taught in this same, extreme way when he said, "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away" (Matthew 5:29). Clearly, Paul and the Lord were not recommending this literal surgery. Sin doesn't come from the eye or the hand, but from the heart. Evil comes from within.

Long ago in England, a pickpocket was caught and convicted, and the local magistrate removed his right hand. He was caught again, and they removed his left. He was caught *again*, only this time he had continued his illegality with his teeth! Physical dismemberment doesn't change the heart. "Put to death," as Paul uses it, directs us to dispose of or throw away evil practices. Here Paul directs his readers to get rid of sexual sins and covetousness. They are twin evils in Paul's writing.

Paul breaks sensual sin into four elements that are to be put to death. Sexual immorality is the first. He is referring to every type of immoral sexual relation. Chastity or celibacy was a completely new virtue that Christianity introduced to the world. Paul's teaching here is radical to the pagan culture in its day, and it is almost as radical today. Those who put voice to this sort of biblical morality of celibacy are criticized as being moral dinosaurs.

The second element is impurity, moral filth or moral uncleanness. This idea is wider and more subtle than just physical immorality. It engages and embraces the lurid imagination and speech and acts of a sensual heart or a dirty mind.

The third element is lust or passion. This refers to that shameful emotion that leads to sexual excesses. Paul used the same word to describe the passionate lust of the Gentiles who do not know God in 1 Thessalonians 4:5 and the “dishonorable passions” of homosexuality in Romans 1:26.

The fourth element of sensuality to be disposed of is evil desire. This word draws up ideas of self-serving, aggressive lust. This is a terrible and deadly quartet here and Paul doesn't mince words about how believers are to treat them. Kill them outright. Execute them.

I want to be careful not to venture out into “stay off of my lawn” territory here, and I realize that I may come off sounding like an old crank, but I think that Paul was culturally astute with these four sins then and now. I am not sure that one can find other sins that are more prominent in our culture. And how quickly we have cannonballed into these sins as society. Just being alive means that you are subjected to a constant barrage of sensuality. Watch television for one evening and you are subjected to more visible sensuality than our grandparents saw in their entire lives.

Add to this massive amount of human sensuality the human capacity for self-delusion to justify the presence of sensuality and you understand why Paul was so severe in dealing with these sins. It permeates the church too. You don't have to go very far to find examples of sensuality creeping into the church. Even more tragic is the delusion runs so deeply that people see no inconsistency in their belief and their behavior.

Regardless of a person's delusion, God's Word is clear: “Therefore, put to death what belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desire” (v.5). Paul uses a violent metaphor that expresses pain and effort. Killing naturally means tears and blood, but here it can mean more than that. Pastor Alexander Maclaren put it this way: “It is far easier to cut off the hand, which after all is not me, than to sacrifice passions and desires which, though they be my worst self, are myself.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Perkins, *Let Justice Roll Down* (Ventura CA: Regal Books, 1983), p.203.

By using this metaphor, Paul is teaching his readers (us) that we must execute sensuality whatever the cost may be to us. Proverbs 6:27 says, “Can a man carry fire next to his chest and his clothes not get burned?” Many believers are daily hauling fire onto themselves and have become profoundly scarred in the process. This means a thorough and harsh discarding.

We certainly do not want to endorse legalism, but God’s word speaks clearly to us, and we are to discard those things that lead us into sensuality or promote greed, which the text calls idolatry.

Greed used here does not just mean the desire to possess more than what you have, but it is the desire to possess more than what you ought to have, particularly that which belongs to someone else. Its placement after those four sensual sins is important too for our consideration. Paul associates this idea of greed with those four elements of sexual sin. It is another form of the same evil desire, except greed is aimed at material things. Those two areas cover a multitude of sinning – sensualism and materialism. Many people who were given to sensuality find themselves replacing that desire for money and stuff. Greed and sensuality come from the same source; Paul tells us. It is the lowest form of idolatry. Nothing is lower than putting our trust in a material thing and making it our god.

And whatever we put our trust in, we worship. For a surprising amount of Christians, materialism is their true religion. In some ways, in some sense, there is a way that materialism and greed is more dangerous than sensuality, because greed has so many respectable forms. We spend a lot of time honoring the successfully greedy person. Remember the old proverb? If a man is drunk with wine, kick him out of the church. If a man is drunk with money, make him an elder or a deacon!

Paul says that these sins are serious business that must be dealt with harshly and severely because these sins provoke God’s wrath. “Because of these, God’s wrath is coming upon the disobedient, and you once walked in these things when you were living in them” (vv.6-7). Since we have died and been buried and resurrected and ascended with Christ, since we have been made full of the fullness of God in Christ, there are some things we have to discard: namely, sensuality and materialism. We are to put them to death, regardless of the sacrifice and the pain involved.

And added to these things, we are also to discard evil attitudes and speech. “But now, put away all of the following: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and filthy language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another.” (vv. 8-9a)

Jonathan Edwards, one of America’s greatest pastors and thinkers during the first Great Awakening and the third president of Princeton, had a daughter whose temper was out of control. The problem was not known to the outside world. A young man fell in love with her and asked Edwards for permission to marry her.

“You can’t have her,” was the abrupt answer of Jonathan Edwards.

“But I love her,” the young man replied.

“You can’t have her,” Edwards repeated.

“But she loves me,” protested the young man.

Again, Edwards stated, “You can’t have her.”

“Why?” asked the young man.

“Because she is not worthy of you.”

“But,” he asked, “she is a Christian, is she not?”

“Yes, she is a Christian, but the grace of God can live with some people with whom no one else could ever live.”<sup>2</sup>

The same could be said for people who are filled with “anger, wrath, malice.” The anger Paul describes is growing, multiplying, inner anger, like sap in a tree on a hot day that swells the trunk and branches until they are in danger of bursting. It is the type of festering bitterness that people sit with. Rather than deal with it according to the Scripture, they decide to lean into that anger and double down. Wrath is that anger boiling over. We see it in a quick temper and short fuses. Malice refers to the vicious mind at work to cause harm to a person.

Malice refers to that malignant attitude that plans evil and rejoices when bad things fall on the one that the person hates. In Esther, Haman gleefully builds gallows, intending to hang Mordechai from them (Esther 5:14). These evil attitudes must be put away. If they aren’t, “the heated metal of anger will be forged into poisoned arrows of the tongue.”<sup>3</sup> Or of the Facebook walls.

Further, slander will follow. Slander is harmful, hurtful speech that defames another’s character. Unchecked, this will turn into filthy language from your mouth – foul, abusive speech.

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<sup>2</sup> F.W. Boreham, *The Heavenly Octave*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1978), p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.17

Do not be so naïve and suppose that such things don't exist among believers. They do! "The grace of God can live with some people with whom no one else could ever live."

Paul continued. "Do not lie to one another" (v.9a). Or lie about another. Or use mistruths, half-truths or distorted truths against another. Lying is a great sin against God, against the Church, and against love. Do you remember why God struck down Ananias and Sapphira in the first church? Because He wanted the truth, not deception, not hypocrisy. "Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members, one of another" (Ephesians 4:25). A great church demands great honesty.

### **Lay Aside the Old Life (vv.9b-11)**

Paul's reason for living a godly life? "...since you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self. You are being renewed in knowledge according to the image of your Creator" (vv.9b-10). We must put off the evil, sinful practices of our former life because when we came to Christ, being baptized into His Body (1 Cor. 12:13) and born again (John 3:5-7), we spiritually "put off the old self" and "put on the new self." "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17). All authentic believers have a new self, with a new sensitivity to the Spirit as well as access to the Fruit of the Spirit and abilities and gifts provided by the Spirit. For a person who is in Christ, this is a life of wonderfully new possibilities.

And Paul tells us that this "new self" is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its Creator. In other words, there should be constant renewal taking place in the life of a believer. A Christian is to be continually increasing in true knowledge of what God is like. And this knowledge will lead to a sense of progressively being conformed to the image of the Creator. This is how we build a life. Paul provides a powerful thought that deserves further contemplation this week. Take some time and consider what Paul says about putting on a new self. "So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day" (2 Cor. 4:16). "And we all, with unveiled faces, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:18).

The more we put off the old nature, the more we realize that the old nature just doesn't fit now – like old clothes that don't fit – the more freedom we will experience through the renewal of our new selves, according to the image of God.

If that promise of continual renewal and transformation wasn't enough, Paul provides a kicker here. We put off the evils of the old self so that the new self will be such a radical renewal that it will transform all human relationships. “In Christ, there is not Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all” (v. 11).

If we make a habit, a practice, of putting to death our sensuality and greed, laying aside evil attitudes and malignant speech and lies, we will fully experience this astounding removal of barriers in human relationships. This new self in Christ, when it is lived out genuinely and obediently, brings the destruction of racial barriers (“Greek and Jew”). This new self in Christ brings the destruction of religious barriers (“circumcised and uncircumcised”). This new self in Christ brings the destruction of cultural barriers (“barbarian, Scythian”<sup>4</sup>). And this new life in Christ brings the destruction of social barriers (“slave, free”). Did you catch what Paul was saying? If we put on the new life in Christ and allow knowledge of that life to transform us, we will put that old life and its sensuality, greed, lies and malicious attitudes to death because they don't fit anymore. And when those things are put away, racial, religious, cultural and social barriers are removed because people are drawn to Jesus.

“By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). We spend a lot of time in our lives making room for stuff that simply doesn't look like Jesus. The outside world is hungry for, starving for anything that looks genuine and authentic. They want to come across something that is the real thing. That is what Paul is calling us to become. He has established the beautiful and high theology of the first two chapters of Colossians. And now he is demanding immense and intense application of those chapters. He calls us to put off sensuality – sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desire, and greed.

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<sup>4</sup> A barbarian was defined as someone who was not a Greek speaker. Greek was the language of the Roman empire and widely spoken. Most likely, Colossae housed many “barbarians.” Scythians were the worst of the barbaric types. They lived along the Black and Caspian Seas in the first century.

He calls us to put off our evil attitudes of anger, wrath, and malice. He calls us to put off evil speech, slander, and filthy language. And he calls us to put off deception and lies.

We are to put these things off because we have a new self that is being renewed in the image of the Creator. We put these off so that new relationships with people and show them how Christ is first and foremost. This isn't some text telling us to "hate ourselves" and focus on how awful we are. It provides a variety of things that we are to learn to live without, to cut them carefully, precisely, yet brutally out of our lives, so we can live in freedom.

You are to preach this to yourself often. We do this because these things are idols, and we place them in front of Jesus. Paul tells us that these idols don't us anymore. Sensuality in all of its sinful forms must be put away. Greed must be put aside. Lies and malignant attitudes must be put away. Evil speech and deception must be put aside. If we aren't careful, they become more important to us than Christ.

Today, come to the Savior and see His beauty and leave all of this ugliness behind. And then do that again tomorrow. Come to the Savior and exchange your ugliness for his beauty. And then the day after that. And the day after that. Come to Jesus and understand Him, his love and his grace more and more, every day.



**ANNOUNCEMENTS:**

**Wednesday Bible Study returns on Wednesday, August 23<sup>rd</sup>, at 10:30AM.**

We will resume our study in the book of Mark.

**Childrens Ministry Trip to Sky Zone in Hagerstown: Sunday August 13<sup>th</sup>. 3-**

**5PM. Cost is \$10.** We will meet AT Sky Zone at 2:45. Sign up at the welcome center.

This is for all children ages 4 through 5<sup>th</sup> grade.

**Men's Ministry Trip to The Ballpark in Loudon: August 19<sup>th</sup>, 11AM-1PM.** The

cost is \$25 per person. The Ballpark is a unique batting cage experience that allows a batter, through the wonders of technology, to hit in any ballpark they choose! Enjoy a great time! Sign up in the welcome center.

**Women's Biblical Community Group, Sunday mornings beginning August 20<sup>th</sup>!**

**Women's Ministry Bible Study: Launches Tuesday evening September 5<sup>th</sup>.**

**6-7:30PM.** Led by Cindy Gresham at the church building. The study is *Abide* by Jen Wilkin.