

LESSON 6

Learning to Say No to Sin

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. But now, put away all the following: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and filthy language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, 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.

— Colossians 3:5–10

So then, brothers and sisters, we are not obligated to the flesh to live according to the flesh, because if you live according to the flesh, you are going to die. But if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

— Romans 8:12–13

Paul's word for what we do with sin is killing, and he means it. We do that work by the Spirit's strength, as people who have already died with Christ and are being made new.

The Fencerow

BUSH HONEYSUCKLE GROWS ALONG NEARLY EVERY FENCEROW IN SOUTHWEST OHIO. Someone planted it on purpose a long time ago for hedges and for the birds, and it got loose; now it fills the woods along every back road. It leafs out before anything else in the spring and holds its leaves long after the oaks let go, so nothing underneath it gets enough light to grow.

The first thing most of us try is a chainsaw. Cut it off at the ground, drag the brush to the burn pile, and the fencerow looks clean for a season. Then the stump sends up five shoots where there used to be one. We can mow it every summer for twenty years and end up with a thicker hedge than we started with, because cutting it back only keeps it out of sight. Nothing is dead until the root is.

Most of us have handled some sin exactly that way. We cut it back when it embarrasses us, and we go a month, sometimes a year, with the ground looking clear. Then a hard week comes, and it's back, thicker than before. Lesson 2 promised that sin would not *rule* over us, and Lesson 3 said the Spirit gives us the strength for the fight. This week we come to the fight itself, and Paul's word for it is blunt.

Rules with a Good Reputation

Just before he says that word, Paul tells the Colossians what does not work. Somebody in Colossae had been handing them lists: *"Don't handle, don't taste, don't touch,"* Colossians 2:21. The lists looked serious, and Paul admits it. *Although these have a reputation for wisdom by promoting self-made religion, false*

humility, and severe treatment of the body, they are not of any value in curbing self-indulgence, Colossians 2:23.

That is a striking thing to say about strict rules: they have a reputation, and that's all they have. A rule can keep our hands off something for a while, the way a chainsaw keeps a fencerow clean for a summer. It cannot reach the wanting underneath, and the wanting is the root. Lesson 5 was about what we want, and Paul is on the same ground here.

Five verses later he tells them to kill it. What is the difference between *severe treatment of the body*, which Paul calls worthless, and putting sin to death, which he commands?

Already Dead

The *therefore* in Colossians 3:5 points back to the verses just before it. *For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God, Colossians 3:3.* Paul states it as something already finished, and he had already told them when it happened. *They were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, Colossians 2:12.*

So, the command comes to people who have already died. *Therefore, put to death what belongs to your earthly nature, Colossians 3:5.* How do dead people kill anything?

Something has already happened to us in Christ, and what is true of us there has to be made true in the parts of us that still live on this earth. *Earthly nature* is, word for word, "the members that are on the earth."²⁶ Paul means the real places where sin gets its foothold: our eyes, our hands, our appetites, our tongues. Two verses earlier he told us to *set your minds on things above, not on earthly things, Colossians 3:2.* Now he names those earthly things one by one and tells us to kill them.

It's a hard verb. Paul's word for *put to death* shows up in only two other places in the New Testament, and both describe Abraham's body, which was *as good as dead* by the time Isaac was promised.²⁷ Paul gives it as a single, decisive command, the way we finally decide to dig out the whole stump instead of mowing around it one more year.

What Paul Names

Last week's reading asked us to mark the items in verse 5 that are desires rather than actions. *Sexual immorality* is something done with the body, and *impurity* can go either way. The last three (*lust, evil desire, and greed*) live entirely on the inside, where nobody watching us would ever see them. Paul starts with what the body does and works his way inward to what the heart wants, and the inward things take up most of the list.

Notice the word *evil* in front of *desire*. In our last lesson we learned that desire by itself is no sin; Jesus used this same word for his longing to eat the Passover with his disciples. Paul is naming the wants that have gone bad, and those are the ones marked for death.

Then he gives the last one a second name: *greed, which is idolatry*. Greed is the wanting of more,²⁸ and at first it seems out of place next to sexual sin. Paul puts it there anyway and hands it the worst name on the list. He told the Ephesians the same thing about *every sexually immoral or impure or greedy person, who is an idolater, Ephesians 5:5.* Why would wanting more be idolatry? Whatever we keep reaching for to make life finally enough is sitting in the place that belongs to God. Very few of us would ever bow to a

carved image. Greed is the form idolatry usually takes among church people, and it is respectable enough that we rarely call it by name.

Paul does not soften the stakes either: *Because of these, God's wrath is coming upon the disobedient, and you once walked in these things when you were living in them*, Colossians 3:6–7. *Once* is the key word in that sentence. That life is behind them.

A Change of Clothes

But now, put away all the following: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and filthy language from your mouth, Colossians 3:8. The list has moved again: verse 5 went from the body to the heart, and verse 8 comes back out through the mouth. These are the sins that tear marriages, families, and local congregations apart, and most of them do their damage out loud.

Put away is the word for taking off clothes.²⁹ Paul keeps the picture going: *Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self*, Colossians 3:9–10. Look at the tense. *Have put off* and *have put on* are both finished. Lesson 2 called our baptism a burial, and Paul adds a change of clothes to the same moment. What he asks of us now is to quit wearing what we already took off.

Then the verb changes voice. *You are being renewed in knowledge according to the image of your Creator*, Colossians 3:10. *Being renewed* is passive and ongoing, the same family of words as the renewing of the mind in Lesson 4.³⁰ We take the old clothes off; someone else does the renewing, and he works from a pattern. Paul has already said whose image that is: *Christ is the image of the invisible God*, Colossians 1:15.

The passage has two halves. The killing is ours, and Paul puts it in the imperative. The renewing is God's, and Paul puts it in the passive.

By the Spirit

Lesson 3 left Romans 8:13 waiting for this week. *But if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live*. Here, two details answer the question Colossians 2 raised.

The first is the tense: in Romans the verb is present, something we keep on doing.³¹ Colossians gives the command as one decisive act; Romans describes the same work going on day after day. We decide once to go after the root, and then we keep deciding every time the old want sends up a shoot.

The second is the source of the strength, and *by the Spirit* is what separates this from the *severe treatment of the body* Paul dismissed. Rules work from the outside in, while the Spirit lives in every Christian and works where the wanting is. Scripture promises that he does that work, whether or not we feel anything at the time, and it puts his weapon in our hands: *the sword of the Spirit—which is the word of God*, Ephesians 6:17.

What does that look like on an ordinary day of the week? Paul gives a practical answer later in Romans: *But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh to gratify its desires*, Romans 13:14.

There is the clothing again, along with a warning about supplies. A provision is what we lay in ahead of time. It's the pack of cigarettes kept in the glove box just in case, the app we never got around to deleting, the old grudge we rehearse on the drive home. We can't say no to a want we are still feeding. Most of the time, saying no to sin starts days before the temptation shows up, when we quit stocking the pantry for it.

The Root

Which sin have you been cutting back every summer? You know exactly where it grows. You've probably made rules about it, and you may have gone long stretches when the ground looked clear. This time Paul is asking for the root, and he gives us the Spirit's strength to dig it out. He also reminds us that the old self it belonged to is already dead.

Jesus said no to sin in a moment the Gospels let us watch up close. He had just told his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, suffer, *be killed, and be raised the third day*, Matthew 16:21. *Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, "Oh no, Lord! This will never happen to you!"* Matthew 16:22. Only a few verses earlier Jesus had called Peter blessed. Now the temptation to skip the cross came from one of his closest friends, in words that sounded like love.

Jesus answered at once: *Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me because you're not thinking about God's concerns but human concerns*, Matthew 16:23. *Thinking about* is the same verb Paul used when he told us to *set your minds on things above*.³²

Then Jesus turned to the rest of them. *If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me*, Matthew 16:24. He had just refused the easy road for himself, with the cross still ahead of him. The no he asks of us is one he said first.

Key Concepts

Complete each statement. Answers in endnotes.³³

1. Colossians 3:5 tells us to put to _____ what belongs to our earthly nature.
2. Colossians 3:5 says that greed is _____.
3. Colossians 3:10 says the new self is being _____ in knowledge according to the image of its Creator.
4. Romans 8:13 says that if by the _____ you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.
5. Matthew 16:24 says that anyone who wants to follow Jesus must _____ himself.

Discussion Questions

Opening

1. Have you ever tried to get rid of something that kept coming back: a weed, a stain, a bad habit? What finally worked, if anything did?
2. Think of a rule you once made for yourself, like no sweets after supper or no phone at the table. How long did it hold, and why?

Core

3. Read Colossians 2:20–23. Paul says strict rules have *a reputation for wisdom* but no power over self-indulgence. Why do rules feel so effective to us, and where do they fall short?
4. Read Colossians 3:1–5. Paul tells us *you died* and then tells us to *put to death*. How do those two statements fit together?
5. Three of the five things in Colossians 3:5 are desires, and Paul calls greed idolatry. Why would wanting more be a kind of worship?

Deeper

6. Romans 8:13 says we put sin to death *by the Spirit*. What is the difference between fighting sin by the Spirit and fighting it by willpower? How could anyone tell the difference from the outside?
7. Read Matthew 16:21–24. The temptation Jesus refused came through a friend, in words that sounded kind. Where do our temptations tend to sound kind?

Journaling Prompts

15–20 minutes. Nobody reads these but you.

1. Name one sin you have been cutting back instead of putting to death. Write down what cutting it back has looked like, and how long it has been going on.
2. Romans 13:14 says to *make no provision for the flesh*. Write about one provision you are still keeping for something you say you want gone.
3. Colossians 3:10 says you *are being renewed*. Write about one thing in you that is different from five years ago, and how you know it changed.

Weekly Practice

THIS WEEK. Remove one provision.

Take the provision you wrote about in your journal and get rid of it before Wednesday. Delete it, throw it out, drive a different way home, or tell one trusted Christian about it. Each morning, read Colossians 3:1–10 aloud, and when the old want shows up during the day, answer it with Colossians 3:3: *For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.*

Looking Ahead

Lesson 7 – Developing Godly Habits, 1 Timothy 4:7–8; Luke 22:39

This lesson asked what we need to stop doing. Lesson 7 asks what we keep doing, week after week, on purpose.

Paul tells a young preacher to *train yourself in godliness*, 1 Timothy 4:7. Luke shows us what that looked like in Jesus on the night before the cross: *He went out and made his way as usual to the Mount of Olives*, Luke 22:39.

Read 1 Timothy 4:6–10 and Luke 22:39–46 before the next class. In Luke, count how many times Jesus tells the disciples to pray, and notice what he tells them to pray about.

²⁶ The phrase is *ta melē ta epi tēs gēs*, which the King James renders *your members which are upon the earth*. *Members* is the ordinary word for the parts of the body, used in Romans 6:13 where the CSB has *do not offer any parts of it to sin*. On the earth repeats Colossians 3:2 word for word, where the CSB has *earthly things*.

²⁷ *Put to death* in Colossians 3:5 is *nekroō*, an aorist imperative. Its only other New Testament uses are Romans 4:19 and Hebrews 11:12, both of Abraham: Romans calls his body *already dead*, and Hebrews calls him *as good as dead*. Romans 8:13 uses a different verb, *thanatoō*.

²⁸ *Greed* is *pleonexia*, built from *pleon*, more, and *echō*, to have. Jesus warns against it in Luke 12:15: *Watch out and be on guard against all greed, because one's life is not in the abundance of his possessions*.

²⁹ *Put away* is *apotithēmi*, the verb for laying aside a garment. Luke uses it in Acts 7:58, where the witnesses at Stephen's stoning *laid their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul*. *Put off* in Colossians 3:9 is *apekdyomai*; its noun stands behind *by putting off the body of flesh* in 2:11, the verse just before Paul mentions baptism.

³⁰ *Being renewed* is *anakainōō*, here a present passive participle. Its noun, *anakainōsis*, is the *renewing* of Romans 12:2.

³¹ *Put to death* in Romans 8:13 is *thanatoute*, present tense. *Deeds* there is *praxeis*, the same word the CSB renders *practices* in Colossians 3:9.

³² The verb is *phroneō*. Paul uses it in Colossians 3:2, *set your minds on things above*, and Jesus uses it in Matthew 16:23, *you're not thinking about God's concerns*. Paul also uses it in Romans 8:5 of those who *have their minds set on the things of the flesh*.

³³ ANSWERS: 1. death · 2. idolatry · 3. renewed · 4. Spirit · 5. deny