

X. Off with the Old Man

May 12/13, 2010

Colossians 3:1-9

Aim: To recognize that being in union with Christ requires us to have heavenly minds and righteous lives.

A. Set Your Mind on Heavenly Things (Colossians 3:1-4)

The apostle Paul wanted his first readers in first-century Colossae to realize that, in this world, Christians are indeed a kind of resident alien. Their real identity and origin are not earthly, but heavenly. As Paul moves to the practical side of the epistle, he begins by calling the readers to that preoccupation with heavenly reality that is the hallmark of true spirituality, and the starting point of practical holiness. The world needs heavenly people as never before, and this is what Christians are when they live up to their true identity. The message of this passage to Christians, whether in the first or twenty-first century, then, is: ‘Be what you are!’

Two parallel commands constitute the heart of this brief paragraph: ‘set your heart on things above’ (v. 1)/‘set your minds on things above’ (v. 2). The positive tone of the commands in these verses contrasts with the negative focus in 2:8-23. From what the believer is not supposed to do – allow false teachers to impress their agenda on them (cp. 2:8, 16, 18) – Paul now turns to what believers are to do – focus on the new, heavenly dimension of reality that has dawned with the coming of Christ. The ‘things above’ that Paul wants his readers to concentrate on stands in contrast to the ‘earthly things’ of the false teaching. The basis for his commands picks up the theology that Paul has already developed in chapter 2.

The *past* experience of dying with Him and being raised with Him is the basis for our *present* status as people whose heavenly identity is real and secure, yet hidden, an identity that will be gloriously manifested in the *future*. Colossians 3:1-4 occupies a transitional place in the argument of the letter. It applies the key theological concept of union with Christ, which Paul develops negatively in 2:16-23 to counter the false teaching, in a positive direction, calling on believers to recognize the basic implications of their status as ‘dead’ to the ‘elements of the world,’ ‘alive’ with Christ in heaven, and destined for glory.

1. Seek and Set (3:1-2)

a) *Christ in Heaven (3:1)*

(1) Raised with Christ (3:1a)

‘If then you were raised with Christ...’

‘If’ denotes reality, as in 2:20, and can be translated as ‘since.’

Paul now proceeds to urge the Colossians to live the Christian life without worldly rules or worldly wisdom. Not only have they died with Christ (2:20), but they have also been raised to life with Christ. Paul, following his typical ‘already/not yet’ paradigm, asserts that those who belong to Christ have already experienced a ‘spiritual’ resurrection with Christ. The verb actually means ‘to be co-resurrected.’ It is an accomplished fact (cp. Gal. 2:20).

We have already met this idea in Colossians 2. It stems from Paul’s teaching in a number of places that each Christian is a person ‘in Christ.’ In the mind of God, the Christian is so closely

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identified with his Savior that his standing, his destiny, and his very identity are inextricably linked to Jesus. Thus, when Jesus died at Calvary, there is a sense in which that person that the believer used to be prior to his conversion died with Him, and that person no longer exists. To be ‘raised with Christ’ is to have undergone a joint resurrection with Him.

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 dimension. They possess divine and eternal life, which is not merely endless existence, but a heavenly quality of life brought to them by the indwelling Lord. This new life is real and powerful, but so is remaining sin. Though it no longer is our master, it can still overpower us if we are not presenting ourselves to God as servants of righteousness.

Unfortunately, many Christians fail to understand and pursue the fullness of Christ. Consequently, because of not knowing what the Scripture says, or not applying it properly, they are intimidated into thinking they need something more than Him alone to live the Christian life. They fall prey to false philosophy, legalism, mysticism, or asceticism. Paul reminds the Colossians that they have risen with Christ. This is the path to holiness, not self-denial, angelic experience, or ceremony. They are no longer living the old life they have lived before their salvation, but possess the eternal life of Christ and have been raised to live on another plane.

(2) Seek Heavenly Things (3:1b)

‘...seek those things which are above...’

In calling upon Christians to be what they are, Paul set before the Colossians the challenge to live as heavenly people, and in doing so, to bring something of the quality of heaven to earth to irradiate and suffuse all their relationships and life situations.

Only a person who has died and been born again and ‘seek those things which are above.’ In the Greek, the verb translated ‘seek’ (*zēteite*) means that we are to seek continually, with determination and consistency. Sporadic and fitful seeking will not suffice. We are to persistently seek and keep on seeking.

The Christian’s desire to look above is not to obtain material blessings; he looks above for spiritual realities. ‘Things above’ are not material, but rather have to do with Christ’s sovereign reign over the universe as He fills the universe with His power. They include His character, His presence, His heavenly joys. Paul is not saying that believers should seek to *possess* ‘the things above’ (*ta anō*); rather, they are to seek to orient themselves totally to these heavenly realities. We are to make our heavenly status in Christ the guidepost for all our thinking and acting. We are not to be seeking heavenly geography, but the One who dwells there. Believers ‘seek the things above’ by deliberately and daily committing ourselves to the values of the heavenly kingdom and living out of those values.

Paul is not advocating a form of mysticism. Rather, he desires that the Colossians’ preoccupation with heaven govern their earthly responses. To be preoccupied with heaven is to be preoccupied with the One who reigns there and His purposes, plans, provisions, and power. It is also to view the things, people, and events of this world through His eyes and with an eternal perspective.

The false teaching apparently offered its adherents access to the heavenly realm (cp. 2:18). Paul by no means completely disparages his readers’ concern with the heavenly realm. Instead, he

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attempts to redirect it. The philosophy's advocates take the earthly situation as their starting point, from which by their own efforts and techniques they will move beyond the body, gain visionary experience and ascend into heavenly spheres. The write moves in the reverse direction, seeing the starting point and source of the believer's life in the resurrected Christ in heaven, from where it works itself out in earthly life.

It is a very persistent cliché in Christian circles to refer to people who have not yet come to faith in Christ as 'seekers.' This is not a biblically informed way to describe such people. Paul writes elsewhere that, by nature, 'there is none who seeks after God' (Rom. 3:11). If anything, rather than searching for God, unbelievers run away from Him and search for excuses. It is God who does the seeking. But once a person has been found by God and taught by grace to value Christ, he will seek more contact with Him.

It is also worth noting that Paul did not encourage his readers to 'seek those things which are within.' It is often supposed that the way to enlightenment involves looking inside ourselves. The way of the mystic can seem very attractive. But there is no hope of spiritual enlightenment or safety for those who go looking in that direction.

(3) Christ's Position in Heaven (3:1c)

'...where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God.'

What are we to seek? First of all, we are to seek Christ Himself. This means, in the second place, that we must also seek the things that please Him. Thirdly, we should be reassured in our seeking because Christ is a living, reigning king. There is an echo here of Psalm 110:1. The Christ whom we are to seek is not a dead prophet but a reigning sovereign, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. The Bible speaks often of Christ's exalted position (cp. Luke 22:69; Acts 2:33; 5:31; 7:56; Eph. 1:20; Heb. 1:3; 8:1; 1 Pe. 3:22). The 'right hand' signifies the place of honor and prominence (e.g., 1 Kgs. 2:19; Mk. 10:37). Because of Christ's coronation and exaltation to the Father's right hand, He is the fountain of blessing for His people.

Paul not only defines the heavenly realm but, more importantly, provides motivation for us to see to orient ourselves to that heavenly realm. Spiritual growth, Paul has made clear, comes only from Christ, who is in heaven. The comma after the word 'is' (*estin*) places the emphasis where it belongs, on the simple fact of where Christ *is* rather than on what He is doing.

b) Things on Earth (3:2)

'Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth.'

Paul's next exhortation to the Colossian believers was that they should take control of their thought lives. Paul has already told the Colossians to set their hearts on things above; now he urges them to do the same thing with their minds (Paul regularly refers both to our hearts and minds). Not only are we to direct our emotions to 'things above,' we are also to set our minds in that direction.

'Set your minds' is from *phroneō* and could simply be translated, 'think,' or more thoroughly, 'have this inner disposition.' It refers not to a pure mental or intellectual process, but to a more fundamental orientation of the will. Once again, the present tense describes a continuous activity. We are to make a habit of directing our thinking away from sin and towards Christ. The believer's whole disposition should orient itself toward heaven 'where Christ is,' just as a compass needle orients itself toward the north.

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We should not allow the standards of this world to dominate our spiritual lives. This does not mean that we should cut ourselves off from the world. The monk or nun who shut him or herself away from the world cannot escape the corruption of his or her own heart.

We are *not* to set our minds ‘on earthly things.’ This includes not only material possessions, but the immaterial things of this world: earthly honors, position, advancement. We must note that Paul is not suggesting that the Christian withdraw from commerce and any possibility of prominence or achievement. But the Christian is no longer to see these things as if they are all that matter.

Paul has probably repeated the initial command of verse 1, in a slightly varied form, simply to set up the additional point of not setting our mind ‘on earthly things.’ Paul is almost certainly suggesting that it is the false teachers who are preoccupied with ‘earthly things’ at the expense of ‘the things above’ – which is quite an ironical twist. For, as 2:18 suggests, the false teachers, because of their preoccupation with their visionary experiences, would have been the ones bragging about their focus on the ‘things above.’ In reality, Paul effectively responds that they have their minds set on the things of this world. ‘Things above,’ Paul is making clear, are tied to Christ, enthroned above, and must reflect the values of the kingdom that He has inaugurated. Anything else, or less, is no more than ‘worldly’ thinking.

Setting our hearts and minds on ‘the things above’ and not on ‘earthly things’ is both necessary and possible. It is necessary because our union with Christ means we no longer belong to the realm of this earth but to the heavenly realm; and it is possible because our union with Christ severs us from the tyranny of the powers of this world and provides us with all the power needed to live a new life (cp. 1:10-14).

What we set our minds on determines our seeking and thus the direction of our Christian lives. What do you think about when you have nothing else to do? We must also remember that our mind-set is a deliberate act of the will. We can set our minds on ‘things above.’

2. Hide and Appear (3:3-4)

a) *Hidden with Christ (3:3)*

‘For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.’

Paul now grounds (‘for,’ *gar*) the imperatives of vv. 1 and 2 with an appeal to theology. Paul’s reasoning is based on the *past* and *future* history of all true believers. Our *past* is given in verse 3. Believers have died to the world system (cp. 2:20). Of course, we have not ‘died’ physically but spiritually. The past tense of *apothnēskō* (‘you have died’) indicates that a death took place at salvation. In what sense has the believer died? In the sense that the penalty for sin has been paid. The wages of sin is death, so we must die. By union with Jesus Christ, we die the required death in Him, thus the penalty is paid and sin can never claim us again. We have thus died to sin in the sense of paying its penalty. Its presence and power still affect us – but it cannot condemn us.

Because we died with Christ, our lives are now hidden with Christ. The tense here is imperfect, which stresses ongoing effects. Because we are in Christ and Christ is in God, we are inseparable and secure. Our lives are a part of the ‘above.’ In Him there is fullness. His fullness has passed into our emptiness, His righteousness into our sinfulness, His life into our death.

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What does it mean that our lives are ‘hidden (*kekryptai*) with Christ in God’? In the first place, the Christian life is a life ‘with Christ in God.’ He is the source of it. His risen life is now ours. Believers share a common life with the Father and the Son. Secondly, this life’s location is not earthly but heavenly. It belongs elsewhere. It is concealed from the world. Its home is in the mind and heart of God and it is not accessible to the human understanding, for a life that is hidden cannot be seen. To people who are not Christians, the whole thing is a mystery. They know nothing of the divine origins of the Christian’s life. They are unable to grasp the full import of the believer’s new life. Thirdly, we should note that a hidden life is safe (cp. Ps. 27:5). Nothing can harm it. Believers are eternally secure, hidden protectively from all spiritual foes. As believers, we are secure and safe from all the harm that world, or the devil, can throw at us. Enemies cannot locate the source of our life because it is hidden within the very being of God.

According to the widespread Jewish apocalyptic worldview, many things relating to God and His purposes exist in the present, but because they are in heaven, they are hidden from human sight. So, Paul suggests, at the present time our heavenly identity is real, but it is hidden. We have certainly not been physically transported to heaven; nor do we, who belong to the heavenly realm, look any different from those around us who still belong to this world. Verse 4 affirms that this will one day change, In the meantime, our true status is veiled; and, though we may not look any different than those around us, Paul’s point in this context is that we certainly need to behave differently.

b) Appearing with Christ (3:4)

‘When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.’

Our *future* is described in verse 4. Christ does not merely give life; He *is* life. Right now our lives are hidden with Christ, but when He is revealed at His coming in His glorious body, we will also be revealed because we will have bodies like His.

More wonderful still, a hidden Savior is to appear, and all His people will appear with Him. It is for this great event that His people eagerly await. This is why believers have their minds prepared for action.

The verb ‘appear’ (*phaneroō*) is the counterpart to ‘hidden’ in verse 3. At the same time, ‘your life’ is picked up and elaborated in verse 4, as Paul identifies Christ as the one who is ‘your life.’ This identification reflects the relentless Christological focus of Colossians (e.g., 1:15-20, 27; 2:2, 3, 19). Paul’s conviction was that the life and destiny of the believer are inextricably bound up with Christ. As Christ died, so believers die with Him (2:20; 3:3). When He died, believers were buried with Him (2:12). As He was resurrected, so believers were raised with Him (2:13; 3:1). And when He appears in glory at the time of His return, believers will appear with Him.

B. Put to Death Your Earthly Members (Colossians 3:5-9)

In Paul’s writing, theology is always followed by a call to live it out. In Colossians, the sublimely esoteric theology of chapters 1 and 2 spawn the challenge in 3:5. For Paul, doctrine demands duty; creed determines conduct; facts demand acts.

We have died to sin’s penalty, but sin’s power still can be strong and our flesh is weak. That is why we must continually put sin to death by yielding to the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:13). Sin is like a deposed monarch who no longer reigns, nor has the ability to condemn, but works hard to

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debilitate and devastate all his former subjects. Sin is still potent, and success against it demands the Spirit's power.

Colossians 3:5-9 is dominated by two negative command: 'put to death' (v. 5) and 'put off' (v. 8). In both verses, Paul follows the imperative with an object that denotes a general class of sins to kill. The lists include some of the most common and troubling sins believers face. They should not, however, be considered exhaustive. The first list, in 3:5, comprises sins of perverted love; the second, in 3:8-9a, contains those of wicked 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.

Scholars have traditionally thought that the vice and virtue lists in the New Testament reflect traditional ethical teaching that is not especially tailored to its particular context. This may well be the case with respect to the list of (mainly) sexual sins in verse 5. But the degree to which Paul concentrates on interpersonal relationships in his ethical teaching in verses 8-17 suggests that the Colossian Christians may have been failing to live out their common life in Christ as they should have been. We can imagine, from our own experiences, that Christians in Colossae would react in different ways to the false teaching, and that these varied reactions could easily lead to strained interpersonal relationships.

1. Put to Death Sexual Sins (3:5)

a) Put to Death (3:5a)

'Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth:'

Paul's use of 'therefore' connects this stark command with what has gone before in verses 1-4. Paul constantly links doctrine and practice in his epistles. Sound theology is foundational to spiritual growth. Paul is suggesting that, since we are to have a 'heavenly mind-set,' we should be eager to get rid of behavior that does not reflect that mind-set. Because we have been 'raised with Christ' (3:1), because we are no longer the people that we once were, since our life is 'hidden with Christ' (3:3) and it is our destiny to appear with Christ at His coming – for all these reasons the remaining sin in our lives must be stamped out. We must put to death everything that is alien to Christ.

Union with Christ, because it puts us in a new relationship to sin and brings us into the sphere of the Spirit's power, *will* impact the way we live. Ultimately, then, the imperative 'put to death' in this verse must be viewed as a call to respond to, and cooperate with, the transformative power that is already operative within us.

The Greek verb behind the phrase 'put to death' (from *nekroō*) is strong and forceful. Believers are to make a decisive resolution to put sin to death, bring the flesh under subjection to the Spirit-filled new disposition. It means that Christians must make every effort to exterminate sinful behavior.

Christians now must live in accordance with their standing in Christ. Christian doctrine is not something that should be kept hidden away in our hearts, even though the reality of it is hidden from the unsaved. It should be demonstrated in the street and in our homes – that is, in our public and private lives.

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The Christian's mortal foe is described as 'your members which are on the earth.' 'Members' (*melos*) is ordinarily used to refer to the parts of the human body (e.g., Mt. 4:29-30; Jas. 3:5-6; 4:1). Paul has already said that each and every Christian 'has died with Christ' (2:20). In that case, what is left that needs killing? Any thoughtful believer knows that there is something inside him that refuses to lie down and die. It is important to note that Paul writes about our relationship to sin in two ways.

In the first place, he writes about it as though it were *an evil tyrant who once ruled over us*. We used to be the 'slaves of sin' (Rom. 6:6), but because our 'old man,' the person that each of us used to be before we became Christians, is dead, we are his slaves no longer. His hideous majesty King Sin can make no legitimate claim on us. Having died, we are no longer under his jurisdiction. This is what the Puritans called 'reigning sin,' and sin's reign is over. It no longer has dominion over the believer (Rom. 6:14). That does not mean, however, that sin has nothing to do with the Christian at all.

In the second place, Paul noted that, though no longer in total control, *sin retains a foothold in our natures* because our physical bodies have not, as yet, been renewed. To use Puritan language again, there is such a thing as 'remaining sin.'

When Paul says 'put to death your members' he is not talking of self-mutilation. What of countries like the Philippines where some Roman Catholics practice self-flagellation? Origen of Alexandria, one of the greatest theologians of the early church, took Jesus' statement that some 'have made themselves a eunuch for the kingdom of heaven's sake (Mt. 19:12) literally and had himself castrated. A common sight in European cities during the Middle Ages was a group known as the Flagellants. Marching through the streets in solemn processions, they scourged themselves in penance for their sins. Jesus also talked about removing your eye if it causes you to sin (cp. Mt. 5:29).

Obviously, neither Jesus nor Paul was recommending surgery, for sin does not come from our members, but from the heart – the evil within. Physical dismemberment cannot change the heart. Paul did not intend his readers to take the word 'members' literally. It is an example of a figure of speech called metonymy, where our members, or limbs or organs, are used to represent the actions that we perform with them. It should be noted that this hits at the Colossian dualism regarding body and spirit. Paul is saying that the body should be holy, under the control of the redeemed spirit.

b) Vice List (3:5b)

'...fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.'

Paul lists five evils that come from our earthly nature. These were things that were abhorred by the religious people of Jesus' time. These are personal sins related to our feelings. Paul progresses backwards 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 comes from the root sin of greed. This list is not comprehensive. Sin is many-sided. It is noticeable that Paul proceeds from the outward to the inward, from the realm of our actions to the murky world of thoughts and impulses.

The first three of the five specific manifestations of the 'earthly nature' that Paul enumerates have to do especially with sexual sin.

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‘Fornication’ translates the Greek *porneia*. It originally had the limited meaning of sex with prostitutes (*pornē*), but by Paul’s day it had come to mean any kind of illicit sexual activity at all.

‘Uncleanness’ or ‘sexual immorality’ is a rendering of the Greek *akatharsia*. It is the opposite of ‘catharsis,’ the word that we use to describe an intense process of mental and emotional healing, where issues are resolved and hurts healed so that we are left ‘clean.’ Paul wanted his readers to understand that the opposite can happen. We can fill our minds with moral pollutants that leave us besmirched and dirty. This term is wider and subtler than physical immorality, for it embraces the lurid imagination, speech, and deed of a sensual heart or filthy mind.

‘Passion’ or ‘lust’ (*pathos*) describes what happens when our physical senses are swamped by the urge for fulfillment (cp. Rom 1:26; 1 Th. 4:5). This shameful emotion leads to sexual excesses.

The last two sins in the list of five appear at first sight to have a more general meaning, but could also have sexual connotations.

‘Evil desire’ (*epithymian kakēn*) is the state of mind that takes us to that dangerous point where we seek fulfillment of our wicked, self-serving, rapacious lust. ‘Passion’ refers to the physical side and ‘evil desire’ refers to the mental side of the same vice.

Behind it all there is the sin of ‘covetousness’ or ‘greed.’ *Pleonexia* comes from two Greek words: *pleon*, ‘more,’ and *exō*, ‘to have.’ It is the insatiable desire to have more, to have what is forbidden, including the desire for more and greater sexual experiences. We are to kill the members of our body which lead us into sensuality or promote covetousness. The Greek word here denotes not merely the desire to possess more than one has, but more than one ought to have, particularly that which belongs to someone else. The mention of this at the end of a list of sexual sins is highly significant, for it is intimately associated with them. It is really another form of the same evil desire, except that it is fixed on material things. Often when sensuality loses its hold, materialism takes its place.

Paul saw covetousness as being tantamount to ‘idolatry,’ as though the two sins were almost one and the same. Covetousness is the root cause of all sin. An idol is a substitute for God and, at heart, the covetous person is a self-worshipper. He puts the satisfaction of his own appetite and longings where God ought to be. Whatever I put my trust in, I worship. There is a sense in which covetousness is even more dangerous than sensuality, because it has so many respectable forms.

Jewish writers habitually traced the various sins of the Gentiles back to the root problem of idolatry; and especially was this true of sexual sins. Putting some other ‘god’ in the place of the true God of the Bible leads to the panoply of sexual sins and perversions that characterized the Gentile world. Paul reflects that tradition here: sexual sins arose because people have an uncontrolled desire for more and more ‘experiences’ and ‘pleasures’; and such a desire is nothing less than a form of idolatry. It is not necessary, then, to suppose that the Colossian Christians were particularly guilty of such sins. Rather, the list reflects the kind of sins to which Gentiles who came to Christ were generally prone.

Paul links sexual immorality, covetousness, and idolatry in Ephesians 5:3-5. The antidote for covetousness is contentment. Contentment is the opposite of covetousness. Whereas the covetous, greedy person worships himself, the contented person worships God. Attacking

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covetousness lays the axe 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.

2. Consequences of the Sinful Nature (3:6-7)

Counterparts of vice lists in the Greek world were concerned simply to foster moral improvement. In the New Testament, in contrast, the vice lists function to depict the lifestyle of the people who are in enmity with the holy God of the Bible and who thus suffer eternal condemnation. The ‘vices’ are therefore elevated to a whole new level of seriousness. The warning of judgment in verse 6 therefore underscores the need to take seriously the exhortation that Christians do away with such conduct.

a) *God’s Wrath (3:6)*

‘Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience...’

Paul goes on to give his friends in Colossae two incentives for being merciless in eradicating the remnants of sin from this present life. The first is that these things merit God’s judgment. Wrath is God’s constant, invariable reaction to sin. Unbelievers will experience the full force of God’s eternal wrath. God’s ‘wrath’ is tied directly to His holiness and depicts the necessary reaction of a personal God to any violation of His character or will.

Because wrath comes ‘on account of these things,’ the sins Paul has just mentioned that typify sin in general, believers should have no part in them. Sin brings wrath, not blessing. It never brings true happiness. The children of God would certainly not want to act like the children of wrath.

Paul’s typical pattern is to associate God’s wrath with the final judgment (e.g., 1 Th. 1:10). To say that something ‘is coming’ is not to say that something has arrived, but that it is on the way. So Paul’s point here is that the final outpouring of God’s wrath is on the way, it is ‘imminent,’ in the sense that God has predicted it could arrive at any time (cp. Eph. 5:5-6).

The reading ‘upon the sons of disobedience’ has strong manuscript support and is adopted in most English versions. The ESV, amongst others, has chosen not to include these words in the text on the basis of a well-established text-critical principle: one should suspect any reading as secondary that has a close parallel in another text. The reason for this principle is the known tendency of scribes to accommodate texts to other familiar texts. We (Moo) hesitantly conclude that the phrase has been added to Paul’s original texts by scribes influence by Ephesians 5:5-6. The addition of the phrase on the basis of the Ephesians parallel is easy to explain, but its omission is not (interpreters who defend its originality appeal to an ‘accidental’ omission, but what kind of accident?). Most commentators prefer to omit the phrase.

It is not a suggestion that believers who fall into sexual sin might lose their salvation and become liable all over again to the judgment and the wrath of God. Paul’s thinking runs more along these lines: unbelievers will merit severe judgment, and rightly so.

b) *Your Former History (3:7)*

‘...in which you yourselves once walked when you lived in them.’

Secondly, Paul urged his readers to reflect on the fact that they too had ‘once walked’ in these things. Verse 6 is phrased as a general theological principle: God’s wrath is going to be revealed in the last day because of all the sins that humans commit. Verse 7 now applies this principle.

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Paul reminds the Colossians that they were ‘once’ (*pote*) people who were condemned to suffer this wrath because of their own sinful lifestyle.

3. Put Off Speech-Related Sins (3:8-9a)

Paul gives a second list of things that need to be eradicated by every follower of Jesus. The sins in this 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. Again, the list is not exhaustive. This time the list proceeds from the inward to the outward, from our thought-life to our actual deeds. It would seem that in this case Paul was concerned to promote good relationships within the local church, since the sins in question largely concern our attitudes to other people and the way we speak to them.

Why was this an issue in Colossae in particular? It probably arose because the teaching of the newcomers was potentially divisive. The favored few can find it very tempting to boost themselves and disparage those without the blessings claimed by the false teachers. It has to be said that the same kind of snobbery can be found among other ‘in-groups’ in the evangelical world. Do we ever give the impression that real fellowship is only possible among those who know what we know, and think as we think – for example, those who read Reformed books?

a) Put Off (3:8a)

‘But now you yourselves are to put off all these.’

There is a notable change of imagery at this point. In verse 5, Paul instructed his readers to put certain things to death. Here, they are told to ‘put off’ certain things. That points ahead to verses 9-10, where the same expression is used. ‘Put off’ (*apothesthe*) is from *apotithēmi*, a word that is used for taking off clothes (cp. Acts 7:58; 1 Pe. 2:1). As a person takes off his dirty clothes at the end of the day, so should believers discard the filthy, tattered rags of their old life.

The central idea is that each Christian is a new person altogether. His old lifestyle is no longer appropriate. Conversion to Christ does not involve a superficial or purely cosmetic change. It is as though the person that I used to be belongs firmly in the past.

b) Vice List (3:8b)

‘...anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth.’

Together with the five sensual lusts in verse 5, Paul lists five aspects of human behavior that spring from an uncontrolled mind. These are sins that manifest themselves in words, aggressive words. Paul’s concern is especially that Christians would avoid unnecessarily critical and abusive speech. The first three sins in the list refer to those attitudes that give rise to such speech.

Paul begins with ‘anger’ and ‘wrath,’ two closely related concepts. ‘Anger’ (*orgē*) is the seething cauldron within. It is a growing inner anger, a deep, smoldering resentful bitterness. ‘Wrath’ or ‘rage’ (*thumos*) is anger boiling over; it is the outburst that flows from it.

‘Malice’ (*kakia*) describes the kind of vicious cruelty that uses words as weapons. It is a mind that plans evil against others. It is the malignant attitude which plans evil and rejoices when misery falls on the one it hates. Paul’s purpose in these first three terms is not to single out three specific sins but to use the three words together to connote the attitude of anger and ill will toward others that so often leads to hasty and nasty speech.

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‘Blasphemy’ translates the Greek *blasphemia*, a word with more than one meaning, depend on the context. When it is used of speech against God, it does mean ‘blasphemy’ as we understand the word in English (cp. Mt. 12:31; 26:65; Mk. 3:28; 14:64; Lk. 5:21; Jn. 10:33; Acts 6:11; Rev. 13:1, 5, 6; 17:3). In this case, however, it refers to malicious speech against others, especially within a local church (cp. Mt. 12:31; 15:19; Mk. 7:22; Eph. 4:31; 1 Tim. 6:4). It would be best to render it ‘slander.’ Slander has the intention of defaming someone’s character. To slander people, however, is to blaspheme God, inasmuch as He created men and women (cp. James 3:9).

In the same way, ‘filthy language’ translates a Greek word (*aischrologia*, literally ‘shameful words’) that does not mean smutty talk so much as foul, abusive talk. Probably, in combination with ‘slander,’ this rare Greek word refers to the use of coarse language when defaming another person. The concluding prepositional phrase, ‘out of your mouth (*stoma*),’ likely modifies in particular the last two sins in this list.

c) *Do Not Lie (3:9a)*

‘Do not lie to one another...’

Paul concludes this second list with a straight-from-the-shoulder charge: ‘Do not lie to one another.’ Lying is a great sin against God, against the Church, and against love. Lying characterizes Satan (John 8:44), not God (Titus 1:2). When believers lie, they are imitating Satan, not their heavenly father. They, of all people, should tell the truth.

The battle for holiness is still being fought in the life of every Christian. On that great day our flesh will be redeemed and we will no longer be temptable. We will have a new outer man acting in holiness that is a perfect match with the inner man who already loves holiness. How can be we victorious in our struggle with sin? First, by starving it. Second, by crowding it out with positive graces (Phil. 4:8).

4. Put Off the Old Man (3:9b)

‘...since you have put off the old man with his deeds...’

a) *Put Off*

Here is a vigorous restatement of the principle that Paul outlined at the beginning. Sinful behavior, whether mentioned in Paul’s two lists or not, is to be eradicated because Christians are what they are, people who have undergone a dramatic change. Here this change is pictured for us as a dramatic change of identity: we are to ‘put off the old man with his deeds’ (cp. Eph. 4:22-24; Rom. 6:6). The kind of behavior that was typical of the person the Christian used to be but is no longer should be discarded as decisively as a man with a new suit puts his tattered old one out with the rubbish.

The verb behind ‘put off’ (*apekdyomai*) is the same verb that Paul used in 2:15 to describe God’s ‘stripping’ of the power of the powers and authorities, and, significantly, is a cognate to the noun that Paul uses in 2:11 to refer to the ‘stripping off’ (*apekdysei*) of the ‘sinful nature’ that takes place in ‘Christian circumcision.’ As Christians have ‘put off’ the ‘sinful nature,’ so they have also ‘put off’ the ‘old self.’ The verb Paul uses here in 3:9 almost certainly has the same basic meaning as the related verb *ekdyomai*, ‘take off’ or ‘strip off.’ This latter verb normally refers to a literally ‘taking off’ of clothes (cp. Mt. 27:28, 31; Mk. 15:20; Lk. 10:30). The same is true of the verb used in 10a, *endyomai* (‘put on’), which refers to the donning of clothes fourteen times

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in the Gospels, Acts, and Revelation. A change of clothes is a rather natural symbol for a change in life or situation.

b) The Old Man

The relation of the old self and the new self has been much disputed. Many hold that at salvation believers receive a new self but also keep the old self. Salvation thus becomes addition, not transformation. They argue that the struggle in the Christian life comes from the battle between the two. Such a view, however, is not consistent with biblical teaching. At salvation the old self was done away with. Salvation is transformation, the old self is gone, replaced by the new self (cp. Gal. 3:27; Rom. 13:14).

What is the ‘old man’? It is the unregenerate self, the former manner of existence in Adam. The ‘new man,’ 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. The Bible views all men as either in Christ, or in Adam. There is no middle ground. The Puritan Thomas Goodwin wrote, ‘There are but two men that are seen standing before God, Adam and Jesus Christ; and these two men have all other men hanging at their girdles.’

It is therefore our ‘Adamic’ identification, with its servitude to sin, that we have ‘put off’ in coming to Christ; and it is our ‘Christic’ identification, with its power over sin, that we have ‘put on.’ We have been brought into a new realm of existence, a realm in which the ‘old man,’ Adam and all that he represents, no longer dictates our thinking or our behavior.

The contrast of the ‘old man’ and the ‘new man’ alludes to one of Paul’s most fundamental theological conceptions: the contrast between a realm in opposition to God, rooted in Adam’s sin and characterized by sin and death, and the new realm, rooted in Christ’s death and resurrection and characterized by righteousness and life. In our text Paul wants to remind us that we have been transferred into this new realm and that because of this transfer we are both empowered and required to live in a new way. The ‘deeds’ characteristic of the ‘old man’ must be ‘put off.’ And the practices characteristic of the ‘new man’ must be ‘put on’ (3:12-17).

The need to work out in daily life the reality of our transfer into the new realm, or ‘new man,’ reflects Paul’s typical ‘already/not yet’ tension. While ‘already’ detached from the ‘old man’ and attached to the ‘new man,’ we yet live in a time when the old has not been finally defeated and destroyed. The old realm continues to exist and exert its influence over us who still live in unredeemed bodies.

The question then arises as to why believers sin if the old self is gone. They do so because the new self lives in the old body and must contend with the flesh. ‘The flesh’ does not mean the body in and of itself; but it does mean the body as it is being used and tyrannized over by sin. It means the body as it is possessed by sin and evil; it is the body as sin dwells in it during this earthly life. The flesh includes all the sinful desires, drives, and passions associated with our humanness.

For next time: Read Colossians 3:10-17.