

Gospel Prime – The Preeminence of Christ in Colossians

Gospel Change: Putting Off and Putting On (Colossians 3:5-17)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on November 24, 2019

Introduction

- ❖ Last week, we started looking at chapter 3, and we noted how this is a pivotal point in Colossians where Paul makes his typical shift from theological development to theological application. After laying out a robust theology of Christ in chapters 1 and 2, now he's going to talk about how that theology makes a difference in our lives.
 - And making a difference is what our passage is all about. **In vv5-17, Paul is going to explain how to change.** How to be different. How to improve yourself. This is obviously a huge subject. How to change. That's what everyone is trying to figure out. The entire education system, the entire field of psychology and psychotherapy, the whole point of counseling and social work (and even economics and politics) – is to answer the question: **How do people change?**

- ❖ One of the encouraging trends we see nowadays is how more people are willing to go to therapy or to get counseling. And to be open about it. To talk about it openly. To be willing to tell others, "I need help and that's why I'm going to a therapist or a counselor." What we've been seeing is the stigma of therapy or counseling has been slowly fading. And that's a good thing.
 - Now with all the introspection that takes in therapy – with all the self-analysis of our childhood experiences and repressed memories – **we definitely have a better sense of where our problems lie.** We're acknowledging our emotional wounds, our addictions, our neurosis. Many people have had breakthroughs in therapy. Now they have a much better grasp of the issues they're dealing with.
 - But that's the limit. **That's how far therapy will get you – it'll help you see the problem.** But until you introduce religion – unless you're willing to deal with the soul and with religious truth claims – you'll see the problem but lack what it takes to make a genuine change.

- ❖ There's this story that **Becky Pippert** recounts in her book *Hope Has Its Reasons*. Some of you will remember her as one of the speakers at the CMC conference last winter. She describes this time she audited a psychotherapy course at Harvard. The professor was going over a case study where the therapist had helped a patient uncover a hidden hostility towards his mother. Diagnosing what at been bothering him – and finally naming it – had brought great relief.
 - Now as the professor was about to move on to the next case, Pippert raised her hand. She said, *"That's great that the patient was finally able to recognize what's been bothering him and name it. But what if he comes back a few weeks later and asks, "How do I get past my anger towards my mother? How do I forgive her? How do I love her? How do I do that?" So how does psychotherapy help a person with a request like that?"*
 - Pippert said there was a deafening silence. The professor answered, *"I think the therapist would say, "Lots of luck!"*" He went on to explain that it's already a huge accomplishment just to be able to face your hidden hostilities – to name your inner anxieties and fears. For this man to expect that his hostility towards his mother can somehow magically disappear isn't realistic. He'll have to learn to live with it and hopefully not be driven by it.

- ❖ Now that remark provoked the class and sparked discussion. Other students chimed in wondering if that's all therapy can offer. Isn't the point to help people change? How do we help people forgive and love those who have wounded us? The students kept going back and forth with the professor. Finally, in a moment of unintended candor, the professor told the class, *"If you guys are looking for a changed heart, I think you're looking in the wrong department."*
- ❖ **In other words, therapy can only take you so far.** It can help you see the problem. It can help you name the problem. It can even help you cope with the problem. But to change. To overcome. To experience transformation and a changed heart. You're looking in the wrong department.
 - **You've got to look to the gospel.** And that's what's in this morning's passage. Paul's going to tell us what's wrong with us, but then he'll go on and give the solution – to how we actually change. He answers it in three ways. First, put to death the remaining sins that characterize the old self. Second, prioritize the radical regeneration that produces the new self. Third, put on the righteous virtues that characterize the new self.

Put to Death the Remaining Sins of the Old Self

- ❖ The first thing Paul says about how to change is to kill something. Sounds dramatic. **He's talking about putting to death the remaining sins that characterize the old self.** Look at v5, *"Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry."*
 - Earlier, in vv1-4, Paul was talking about who a Christian is. **He was saying a Christian is not just a religious person but a resurrected person.** Someone who has died with Christ, who has been raised with Christ, and whose life is now hidden with Christ in God.
- ❖ Paul likes to use this idea of an old self and new self (Eph 4:22-24; Rom 6:6). It shows up here in vv9-10. **Literally, it says "old man" and "new man". And so there's good reason to believe that he's referring to our identity in either Adam or in Christ.**
 - We explained, last week, that everyone is born, by nature, in Adam. That makes him our federal head, our representative. Which means everything true of him is true of us. **Adam was under the curse of sin and so are we.** Because of our union with the old man, the old self. So why do we sin? Why does everyone do it? Why is it that you don't even have to teach a toddler to sin? **It's because we're all born into the old self. And the old self is the root of all sin.** It's where sin comes from.
- ❖ **Salvation therefore requires a radical reorientation.** A conversion experience. Where you break ties with Adam. Where you die to the old self. Where you crucify it. That's how Paul likes to say it. Listen to **Romans 6:6**, *"We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin."*
 - So when we were under the old self, we were slaves to sin. Think of it this way: **We were once slaves to sin's power and penalty.** To be under the enslaving *power* of sin means you ultimately can't resist. You're under sin's dread sway. And the legal *penalty* of sin incurs the wrath of God, which Paul mentions in v6. It's not a popular or pleasant thing to say – but the wrath of God is coming to punish you for your sin. And it will not relent.

- ❖ **But the good news of the gospel is that Christ took that wrath when he took the place of sinners on the cross.** Christians are those – who not only believe that Christ was crucified for them – they believe they were crucified with Christ. Their old self (the body of sin) was brought to nothing on the cross. We are no longer enslaved to sin. We're free from its *power* and *penalty*.
 - **But here's the humbling reality for every Christian – you have yet to rid yourself of sin's presence.** Sin can no longer condemn you or control you. But it can still influence you through its remaining presence. That's what's still "*earthly in you*". And Paul says that's what you have to put to death.

- ❖ **He goes on to describe the various kinds of sins that remain – that Christians have to deal with.** "*Sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.*" He says, "*6On account of these the wrath of God is coming. 7In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. 8But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth.*"
 - When we were living in Adam, in the old self, our lives were characterized by these sinful behaviors and attitudes. But now. Now that we have died with Christ – now that our old self has been crucified with him – **now we are to put away these sins that characterize the old self.** We are to put them to death – to kill them.

- ❖ Here's another way to put it: **We are to mortify our sin.** This semester I've been reading **John Owen's *The Mortification of Sin*** with one of our college students. It's a great book on sanctification – on how one changes, particularly in regards to sin and temptation.
 - In the book, Owen quotes Colossians 3:5 and explains how mortification is the responsibility of every believer. We should make it our business all our days to mortify the indwelling power of sin. He says to, "*Cease not a day from this work; be killing sin or it will be killing you.*"

- ❖ I remember the first time I read that as a younger believer. It was a foreign concept. **I was under the impression that – since sin had been defeated at the cross – the fight is over.** I don't have to do anything. I just need to rest in Jesus's victory. Now there's truth to that statement. But that's not the only truth to state when answering the question: *How do people change?*
 - If the question was: *How do people get right with God? How do you, as a pitiful sinner, get reconciled to a holy, righteous God?* – then the answer would simply be to rest in Jesus's victory, in his death and resurrection. **You don't contribute anything to getting right with God.** That's all Jesus and God's grace.

- ❖ But if we're talking about how people change – how a Christian matures in the faith – then you've got something to do. **You've got to kill something** – to mortify the remaining sin in your life. Of course, this is where we have to clarify what that looks like.
 - **Mortifying sin is not the same as restraining sin.** You can restrain a lion within a cage. You can prevent it from going around devouring its prey. But the hunger – the lust for prey – is still there. And then the question really is – how strong is my cage?

- ❖ **In the same way, you can restrain someone (or restrain yourself) from acting out those sins in which we're so inclined.** That may serve as a temporary solution, but do not confuse the restraint of sin with the mortification of sin. You can try your best to avoid temptations and to prevent yourself from acting upon them. You might find some method or technique to cage your sinful lusts. But they remain un-mortified. And the question is – how strong is your cage? And my bet is that your sin will always grow stronger.
- ❖ Friends, the solution is to mortify your sin. To kill that lion (animal lovers, don't worry it's just a metaphor). Now the thing is you can't just slay your sin with a sword like you could a lion. **According to Scripture, you mortify sin by starving it.** The opposite would be to feed it – to gratify the desires of your flesh (what is still earthly in you)
 - That's what Paul says *not* to do. Listen to **Galatians 5:16**, "*But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.*" This is **Romans 13:14**, "*But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.*"
- ❖ So you might be successful in restraining your lust, so that you're not committing the same acts of sexual immorality as you were in the past. **But are you starving your lust** – malnourishing it so that it grows weaker and less enticing? **Or are you still making provision for the flesh** – feeding it with what you take in through the eyes or what you fantasize about in the mind?
 - **If you keep feeding your flesh with impure images and ideas, then it's like feeding your caged lion a chunk of nutritious, raw meat every night.** Don't be surprised if it grows so strong that it breaks free of that cage one day.
- ❖ Friends, put to death therefore what is earthly in you. Put it all away. And do it primarily by starving your sin. By making no provision for the flesh. By no longer feeding it. So ask yourself: **What have I been feeding to my soul?** What have I been intaking? Having I been inviting impurity into my life – if just my thought life? Have I been feeding my covetousness – not being content with what I have in Christ. Have I been stewing on my anger, my wrath and malice towards those who hurt me, who offended me? **What can I do, from this point on, to starve the desires of the flesh, to mortify the remaining sin in my life?**

Prioritize the Radical Regeneration of the New Self

- ❖ These are important questions to answer if we truly want to change. If we want to experience the newness of life that we have in Christ. But here's another important question: **How are these efforts to starve the flesh going to be any different from the self-made efforts of avoidance and deprivation that Paul called insufficient back in chapter 2:23?** There he said that asceticism and severe treatment of the body is of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.
 - So in both cases, we're exerting effort – we're contributing to the process of change, of improvement – **but what marks the difference between mere moralistic change and true gospel change?** The answer is that moralistic change is focused on behavior. While gospel change – without ignoring behavior – focuses first on identity. This is our second point: **If we want to change, then prioritize the radical regeneration that produces the new self.**

- ❖ Paul alludes to it in vv9-10, “*Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices* ¹⁰*and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.*” Notice Paul’s logic. His concern is that we stop lying. So you could say he’s concerned with behavior. **But notice how his call for behavioral change was based on a prior identity change** – “*seeing that you have put off the old self. . . and have put on the new self.*”
 - **For there to be a true change of behavior, there first has to be a fundamental change of identity.** Just ask yourself: When is a thief no longer a thief? Most people would say: When he stops thieving. No, he would still be a thief – just a thief in between jobs. There won’t be a change in his behavior until there’s a radical change in his identity.

- ❖ That’s why moralistic change is insufficient. It restrains the old self, but it’s not going to put it off. **The lion in that cage is still a lion. He’s restrained but not changed.** He still has his lion-like nature. But gospel change turns that lion into a lamb – a new creation.
 - Gospel change is about a radical regeneration. Where, through the Holy Spirit, you’re born again. You become a new person with a new identity that we call the new self. **And it’s only out of that new identity that we can realistically expect genuine, lasting behavioral change.** To be a changed person.

- ❖ This is why Paul started chapter 3 with four verses about the Christian’s new identity. As we’ve already said, chapters 3 and 4 are all about how to live as Christians. It covers a number of behaviors starting in v5. **But you can’t get to the command in v5, until you’ve gone through vv1-4 and the gospel realities about your new identity in Christ.** In other words, Paul’s not going to tell you what you ought to do until he reminds you of who you actually are.
 - **Because the gospel is about *being* something before it’s about *doing* something.** I’m sure you know people who are hesitant to become a Christian because their first thought is that it means they’ll have to stop doing this or start doing that. And it sounds either too hard or just unappealing.
 - Tell that friend of yours: You’re focusing on the wrong thing. Behavior will come into play. Christianity does concern behavior. But that’s not the pressing issue for someone who is not yet a Christian. **The pressing issue is not about changing your behavior – it’s about being changed altogether with a new identity.**

- ❖ **Let’s say you’ve got a sour lemon tree, but you want sweet oranges.** Let’s face it, those branches will be filled with sour lemons. You can pick them all off and hand-tie sweet oranges to each branch. And it might look like an orange tree for little while. But in time, the lemons will grow back. The tied-on oranges will rot and fall off. And you’re left with what you started with. If you can’t just pick off what you don’t like and put on what you do. That won’t produce genuine, lasting change. **You’ll need to change that tree altogether at the root.**

- ❖ I think there are some of you trying to become a Christian by putting on certain behaviors. You’ve grown up in this environment. You know the expectations. You know how to behave. But you’re just dressing up a sour lemon tree. **You’re focused on the fruit of behavior, but you’re ignoring the root of identity.**

- ❖ If you want to truly change, then, yes, you'll have to deal with your behavior. You're going to have to put some things to death. You're going to have to mortify remaining sin. **But none of that will matter if you don't go through a radical regeneration where your identity is fundamentally changed – where you become a new self.**
 - And that only comes by grace through faith. Through faith, believe in these gospel realities. And through faith, ask God to grant you the new birth – to become a new self.

- ❖ **Now Christian, don't get too high on yourself just because you're a new self.** The new self is not yet perfect. It's still in process. Paul says in v10, the new self is still "*being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.*" So we still have a ways to go. We still need to change and improve and grow in godliness – to look more like God.
 - But the whole point is that this growth, this change, is made possible because of our new identity in Christ. **At the core of who you are, as a Christian, is this truth: I am united with Christ. I have died with him. I have been raised with him. And my life is now hidden with him in God.** That is the most fundamental aspect of a Christian's identity. Being united with Christ is so central to who you are that it transcends any difference you might have with another believer.
 - Paul says in v11, "*Here [that is, in Christ] there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.*" **He's not saying that, within a church, all our differences are erased.** He's saying we might have different ethnicities, different religious upbringings, different socio-economic statuses. **But there can be a beautiful unity between us all – because Christ is all and in all.**

Put on the Righteous Virtues of the New Self

- ❖ So now we've seen the importance of reading Colossians in sequential order – making sure we go through vv1-4 on Christian identity before we deal with changing behaviors in v5 and on. If you want genuine, lasting change in your life, then you first need to be changed in Christ. **You've got to become something new before you're expected to do something different.** But now, if you are new in Christ – then you have something to do to change yourself.
 - This leads to our third point: **If you, as a Christian, want to change, then put on the righteous virtues that characterize the new self.** These virtues are described for us starting in v12. We're responsible to put these things on.

- ❖ This is how I see it. When Paul speaks of putting off the old and putting on the new – picture taking off old, dirty clothes and putting on a new set of clothes called "*the new self*". And picture this as something God does *to* you, through the Holy Spirit, by his grace. **He dresses you in new clothes – in robes of righteousness, in the identity of his beloved Son.** By grace, he chooses you and calls you "*holy and beloved*".

- ❖ Now if God's already put the new self on us by his sovereign grace, then what are we putting on in vv12-14? Think about it this way: **We're putting on the matching accessories.** The primary clothes we wear as Christians is Christ – he is our life! Well, look at these virtues that Paul lists. Notice how they perfectly describe Christ. **So picture these righteous virtues as matching accessories that perfectly complement our identity in Christ.**
- ❖ Let me read vv12-14, and as I name each virtue, ask yourself this: **Have I put on this particular accessory? Or is it glaringly missing in my outfit? Which ones do I need to focus on putting on?** Listen to what the Apostle says, *“¹²Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, ¹³bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”*
 - **Now you're probably wondering – how do we put these virtues on?** Paul explains how in vv15-17. There are two things we are to let Jesus do in our lives. Let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts. And let the word of Christ dwell in us richly. Let's consider each.
- ❖ First, look at v15, *"And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful."* This is a verse about Christian community, about the church. That's the "one body" we're called in. **If you want to put on these virtues, then you've got to be in community with other believers and live peaceably with them.**
 - Did you notice that these virtues we're supposed to put on are all virtues that can only be recognized and expressed in relationship with others? If you live in isolation or just in loose association with other Christians – then you wouldn't have the opportunity to detect these virtues in your life or to express them on a regular basis.
- ❖ How will you know if you've put on a compassionate heart – unless you're in community with people who are needier than you and need your help? And on the flip side, how will you know if you've put off covetousness – unless you're in community with people who have more than you, who have things that you wish you had in your life?
 - If you want to put on kindness, humility, meekness, patience, then be in close quarters with someone whose ego is as big or bigger than yours or whose personality rubs you the wrong way. Bearing with that person instead of complaining and forgiving that person as the Lord has forgiven you – that's how you become kind, humble, meek, and patient.
- ❖ **Our tendency is to gravitate towards people we like, who get us, who we easily get along with.** Enjoying community is easier that way – if that was your goal. But if your goal is to change and mature, then it's not easier. **It's hard to mature in virtue (in Christlikeness) when you're only engaging with people who are like you and who you already like.** That's why we need the church. Where born-again people – with different personalities and varying degrees of remaining sin – can rub up against each other and sometimes run each other the wrong way.

- ❖ **The church is a like a tumbler where you place a bunch of rough stones – precious stones – but still very raw with lots of rough edges.** But in that tumbler, tossed around together, rubbing up against one another – we come out changed, looking like gems, looking more like our precious Savior.
 - **Friends, how would you describe your experience of community in this church?** Are you just loosely associated? Only gravitating towards people you like? Or are you letting God put you in that tumbler we call gospel community and letting the peace of Christ rule in your heart as you rub up against one another?

- ❖ And lastly, if you want to put on these righteous virtues, then, *“¹⁶Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. ¹⁷And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”*
 - The *"word of Christ"* is another way of referring to the gospel – to the good news of our compassionate, kind, humble, meek, patient Lord and Savior; who bore with us to the point of bearing our sins on the cross; forgiving us and loving us and binding us together, as his Church, in perfect harmony.

- ❖ **We put on these virtues by richly dwelling in this gospel together.** If you're new to our church, we want to make a commitment to you. We commit to be a church that teaches the gospel; that wisely admonishes one another with the gospel; that sings the truths of the gospel. Everything we do as a church, we're going to do giving thanks to God for the gospel. **Our commitment is to be a gospel-centered church that never tires of proclaiming the gospel.** That's how we're going to help you change.