

"Becoming a Holy Humanity" (Colossians 3:5-11)

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(Colossians 3:5-11 NIV)

⁵ Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. ⁶ Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. ⁷ You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. ⁸ But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. ⁹ Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. ¹¹ Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.

Let me begin by explaining the context.

This passage is sort of a part one of two parts. The second part is found in the short section that follows in verses 12-17 and even beyond to the household rules of conduct at the end of chapter 3 that we looked at in the month of May and into the first part of chapter 4. In part 2, which we'll be looking at next week, it tells us the positive, proactive type of Christian behavior that comes as a result of the work of the gospel in our lives. Things like being compassionate, humble, forgiving and so on. That's part 2.

Part one, which we are looking at today, tells us what we shouldn't be doing. It tells us the behavior that does not fit a gospel person or a gospel community.

Some of us may have heard or read of times in history or in the present where a society was acting in a way so much better than we ever thought was possible. Maybe it was not a whole nation, but perhaps a smaller group of people that lived a certain way that was so revolutionary, so counter to the culture, that it caught the attention of those around them. It became contagious. So much so that people started to document the phenomenon and sociologists started analyzing why this was so. The people in these societies did things that under normal circumstances would never have been done otherwise. It's all the more amazing when that small window in history opens up because what we normally see in our society or the societies around the world is an 'every-man-for-himself' type of attitude. Under the guise of politeness, a person just show the minimum amount of niceness, so their true self, their self-centered self, doesn't get exposed, but when push comes to shove, when a situation becomes "me versus them", it's back to looking out for #1. We see it every day in the morning commute as we fight for our personal space either in our cars or on a train.

I can think of two examples. The first was during the Second World War. The men of North America were sent off to fight in the front lines of Europe and the East, while those back home also contributed. People back home collectively joined in and did things such as rationing their resources like gasoline, production of some goods such as cars were halted until the war ended, volunteering. Those back home such as students, retirees or housewives went to work to keep the economy going. And that's just a sample of what they did. But what's certain is that everyone, whether voluntarily, or government enforced, was on the same page, making sacrifices so that the war could be won and as little damage as possible would be done to the nation's economy.

The other example I think of is a movement that started in the USA in the late 60's called the Jesus Movement. It was out of the whole hippie culture that this Christian subculture community was birthed out in the west coast in Northern California. But it soon began to spread all over the country and even into Toronto where a youth ministry gathering at St. Paul's Bloor St, attracting 2500 kids a week. They ran coffee houses, lived in communes, gave birth to Christian contemporary music, in fact they were the first to combine rock music and Christianity. Their ministry influenced many churches to reach out to the young people of their day and churches, which were so much more conservative back then, began allowing barefoot hippies to enter the church. Some of you might remember the ministry of Chuck Smith of Calvary Chapel in SoCal. They were the ones who founded Maranatha Praise Music.

But one of the highlights that characterized this movement was communal living. Often it started out as a drug rehab center, but eventually bloomed into a small community where everyone lived together, did everything together, shared everything as a family and served the Lord together as well. Their goal was to live out an Acts chapter 2 type of community.

I share these two examples because of this. The purpose of the gospel was so that through the death and resurrection of Jesus, transformed individuals can form transformed and transforming and transformational communities. This is so important for us to get because many people mistakenly think that Christianity is purely a personal thing. It's me and God. It's God saving me, forgiving my sins, giving me a new identity, placing me in a new relationship, and ensuring my final entrance into heaven. Every single one of those things are undeniably true. Jesus did come, live, die and rise again for us to personally experience all these things. But it's so much more. It's also about a new community.

Here are some examples from Scripture:

God saved an individual, Abraham, to form a nation, a community called Israel, and that people group called Israel then, is now called the church today.

Jesus himself came and ministered directly to individuals, but through that his ministry objective was to establish his church community.

The nature of the earliest gospel ministry recorded in the book of Acts was to save individuals and they immediately formed a community.

Every city to which the Apostle Paul traveled, he shared the gospel to individuals or groups of individuals, but the ultimate goal in every city was to establish a church community.

The metaphors that the New Testament uses to describe the new life are much more corporate than personal:

- The body of Christ
- The family of God
- The new and true Israel
- Priesthood of believers
- A people belonging to God
- A new humanity
- A chosen people
- A holy nation
- A building structure
- A temple

I say all this because in this passage, as well as in next week's passage, the focus is on what the corporate community of redeemed people is to look like. The letter itself is a circular letter intended not only to be read in one particular church, but in multiple churches. As well, all the verbs and nearly all the pronouns in this section are in the plural.

Therefore it's safe to say that a huge part, and even a disproportionate part of our lives as Christians and our identity as Christians and our ministry as Christians, must be done corporately and in community and fellowship with others. That's why we don't merely worship alone or pray alone or serve alone. To grow as a Christian, the personal disciplines must be balanced with the corporate disciplines.

Okay, so let's dive into this passage. In this passage are three points or teachings that we're supposed to see to foster healthy Christian community.

- 1. Things that kill community**
- 2. The reasons to get rid of them**
- 3. The lofty vision for community**

1. Things that kill community

Paul gives us two lists of vices of things, not the only things, but things, that when present, will surely kill and destroy Christian community, or if it doesn't kill it, it will keep it from flourishing.

List #1:

⁵ *Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.*

List #2:

⁸ *But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips.* ⁹ *Do not lie to each other,*

In the first list we see a focus on sexual sins. The first three listed refer to sexual sin and the 4th and 5th evil desires and greed.

Sexual immorality= porneia=any sexual activity outside of covenant marriage between one man and one woman.

Impurity=any kind of moral corruption, but often in relation to sexual sins.

Lust=passion for illicit sexual behavior

Evil desire=basic human tendency toward sin. Perhaps even a connotation to sexual desire.

Greed=selfishness with money and possessions. This is idolatry.

Why the focus on sexual sin? What is the big deal about sexual sin?

Sexual sin at its root is incredibly self-centered. It's not something that has the other individual in mind, nor shows care for the surrounding Christian community. Sexual sin is all about me getting what I want sexually apart from the plan of God.

Greed does nothing to foster community life. In fact it's the thing that destroys it. The early church was filled with herculean feats of generosity, where regularly people sold their land and property to help the poor. There was a regular feeding and caring of orphans and widows. It was a kind of momentary utopia where there were no poor.

Let's look at the next list:

Anger, Rage, Malice, Slander, Filthy language and lying.

When we look at the next list, these things might have been okay when we were not Christians; in fact, they might have been the expected behavior in a Christ-less existence. I think it would have been true with many of us that our lives prior to becoming Christians were filled with these vices. I know mine was.

We don't have the time to go through the definition of each of these words, but you can see that community can't form, nor can it grow in the presence of these things. That's why we are told to get rid of them. They're all community destroying vices.

2. Besides being vices that destroy community, Paul gives us more **reasons to get rid of them**:

i) Because you are Christian.

"Therefore" in verse 5 refers to the contents of the gospel found in the earlier verses. The gospel is not only the power to get rid of these things, they also serve as the motivation to get of these things. Power is useless apart from the motivation to use that power. Power answers, how do I get rid of these things. Motivation answers, why should I get of these things and the reason why is because Christ died for my sins.

ii) Because we have escaped the wrath of God.

The passage says that Because of these things, these sins, these vices the wrath of God is coming. This means that God will judge those who don't repent of these sins. He will judge those who don't receive his free gift of forgiveness in Jesus Christ. But what about for Christians? We have already escaped the wrath of God. We have already been forgiven. We have already been saved. How does this work for us? I think it goes like this. If you and I have been really, truly, deeply touched by the grace, love and forgiveness of God, then we will change. In fact, we can't help but change. And can we say that the more deeply you've been impacted the greater the change will be. That's what Jesus says. "He who is forgiven much, loves much" (Lk 7:47). When Christians realize that they are people who so deserved the wrath of God, but received grace instead, they will stop doing the sins from which they were forgiven—not all at once, and not all of them in total, but noticeably, definitively, they will change. We will say to ourselves, "How can I sin against the one who died for my sins?" "How can I sin against those for whom Christ also died?" And they'll also say, "How can I sin against those who don't know Christ yet?" "How could I think of myself as better or superior to them, when I was saved by grace?"

iii) The third reason to get rid of these vices is because that was my past and my past is dead.

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Verse 7 tells us, You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. This was part of your life before you came to Christ. There's no way you could remain in them after becoming a Christian.

⁹ *Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.*

In becoming a Christian, the old self along with its practices has been taken off and a new self (with a new set of practices) has been put on. And this new self is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. What Paul is implying is that sin has corrupted the image of God within us, the very image of God that was given to Adam and Eve. But sin has corrupted and mutated that original perfect image with us. And what Christ, the new Adam has done, is to begin the process of restoring the original uncorrupted image of God within us.

So here's what's going on. I've shared this before but it's worth sharing again and it fits in right here. Regarding sin, here's how it works.

Before we became Christians, we *could* not sin -- we *had* to sin. All that we do is sinful because the Bible says without faith it is impossible to please God. But once we become Christians, we cannot sin. In other words, it is now possible not to sin, because we have a new nature, we have a new self. And finally, when we get to heaven, we *cannot* sin. There will be no temptation, no ability, not even the remotest possibility or even desire to sin. That'll be amazing.

So, those are the reasons for stripping off the vices from our lives, and from within our community.

3. Lastly, The lofty vision for community

Let me read for you the last verse:

¹¹ Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.

When I first read this in context, I wondered why it was there and what it was trying to tell me. Paul began the section about telling the church to get rid of community destroying behaviors such as the sexual sins and the anger sins. And then woven throughout is the reason for getting rid of them. Then this verse:

¹¹ Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.

Why is it there? I believe it's there to motivate us -- to lift up our sights to the grand design, the lofty vision, the great goal of Christ's gospel and his community.

This is what Paul is saying. What Jesus came to accomplish and establish is a community not seen anywhere else on the planet. Nowhere, never in all of human history have we seen a society, a group of people, like the one Jesus established:

- In Jesus' community he's brought together the races, Gentiles and Jews.
- In the community of Christ, he's brought together the religions, circumcised and uncircumcised, into the true religion.
- In Christianity Jesus Christ has brought together the classes, the lowest of the low, the most disrespected, the muttering barbarian and the Scythian, even the slave and the free.

This is what Christ came to establish through his agonizing death, and glorious resurrection. This is the picture of the new humanity, the new society, the true people of God.

How then could we allow sexual sins, greed, anger, and lying—community destroying things, exist in a community that came at such a high price? You see? He's setting us up. He's casting the vision. Sure the negatives are a great reason to avoid certain behaviors, but look at the positive. Christian community...there is nothing more glorious, nothing more like it on the planet. It isn't perfect, but you won't find it anywhere else. So don't ruin it. Don't let sin destroy it. Don't ignore it. Instead, preserve it. Experience it. Grow it. Share it.