

## The Core: Living with Jesus at the Center

Live by Dying

Colossians 3:5-7

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5 Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. 6 On account of these the wrath of God is coming. 7 In these you too once walked, when you were living in them (Col 3:5-7).

Have you ever done something and thought, "Why did I do that?" Have you ever done something really disappointing and thought, "I'd don't want to ever make that mistake again!" Have you ever had particular sin issue and thought, "I just really wish that I could be free of this!" Have you ever wished that you could see more fruit and good works coming out of your life? I think that everyone in this room resonates with these thoughts. Don't we?

Wishing you could be filled with more good works and longing to be rid of certain sinful patterns is the heart of being a follower of Jesus. Putting your trust in Christ for the forgiveness of your sins is the means by which we are made right with God (justification), but sanctification – the present process of becoming like Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit – always involves two key parts: vivification – developing virtues and mortification – killing sins.

So you will never be able to defeat sin or produce fruit unless you come to Christ. But after you come to Christ your life needs to be consumed by fruitfulness and defeating sin.<sup>1</sup>

There is a dual role of weakening lusts and growing strength toward holiness. You cannot have one without the other. We cannot just focus on bearing good fruit; we must also take up arms against the latent desires of the flesh. Sinful passions must become weaker so that a passion for Jesus can grow stronger. We've got to extinguish a passion for sin while we ignite a passion to follow Jesus. Or, to put it in the words of John Owen, a 17<sup>th</sup> Century Puritan, "Be killing sin or it will be killing you."

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<sup>1</sup> Here is how the Westminster Confession states it: "They, who are once effectively called, and regenerated, having a new heart, and a new spirit created in them, are further sanctified, really and personally, through the virtue of Christ's death and resurrection, by His Word and Spirit dwelling in them: the dominion of the whole body of sin is destroyed, and several lusts thereof are more and more weakened and mortified, and they more and more quickened and strengthened in all saving graces to the practice of true holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord."

We begin this morning our final section in the book of Colossians where Paul will take the positional truths of the previous chapters and begin applying them to our lives. He will take the practical reality of being “in Christ” and apply it to some very specific areas. The title of this section is called “Jesus-centered Living”, and Paul, to borrow a term from author Paul Tripp, is going to be intentionally invasive.

And the first subject that Paul introduces to us is the concept of living by dying, the mortification of the flesh, or putting to death what is earthly. This is the first of three imperatives: put to death (v 5), put away (v 8), and put on (v 12). This morning I’d like to unpack this verse and introduce the idea of mortification or “putting to death” by examining three things: The principle (v 5a), the battle (v 5b), and the motivation (v 6-7). My prayer is that this sermon will help all of us learn some effective strategies for killing sin.

### **The Principle: “Put to Death”**

The fourth word in verse five is “therefore”, and it serves as the link from doctrinal truths about Jesus to specific ways that we are to live. Paul often uses the word therefore to bridge doctrinal sections into application (cf. Rom 12:1; Gal 5:1; Eph 4:1; Phil 2:12). And the doctrinal section that the word “therefore” is connected to is 2:20-3:4 where we learned about a believer’s position in Christ. Paul moves from indicative (describing who we are) to the imperative (commanding us to live). Setting your mind on things above (3:1) involves a real spiritual battle where followers of Jesus Christ put to death sinful inclinations and actions, and they allow the new nature to control their life.<sup>2</sup>

Now the principle that Paul is teaching here is tied to the phrase “put to death.” What does this phrase mean? Let me give you the following data points on it:

**First, it is a mindset.** The tense in the Greek is aorist active imperative which means that it is a command based upon a decisive initial act which creates a settled attitude.<sup>3</sup> You could think of it like a lens through which you see life or, in this case, sin. It means that there is a real spiritual position in which you need to live. In other words, the mindset of the believer’s life is that he or she is “dead” to sin; it is a completed event the reality of which must impact my life.

If you were to say to me, “Mark, tell me about your marriage.” You would be disappointed if I limited my answer to June 25, 1993, because really you are assuming the marriage ceremony. You want to know about the present state of my marriage which began with a ceremony. In the same way, putting sin to death began at conversion – it is official – but there is a mindset and a life that needs to fit with that event.

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<sup>2</sup> Peter O’Brien. Colossians, Philemon – The Word Biblical Commentary. Waco, Texas: Word Publishing, 1982. P. 175-176.

<sup>3</sup> O’Brien, p. 176.

A mindset like this is a familiar theme in the New Testament. Listen to how Romans 6 says this:

11 So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus (v 11)

**Secondly, it involves physical obedience.** Putting something to death is a metaphor from the physical world. There is action and result. This is not just a philosophical idea. Getting this right results in specific actions directly tied to what we do physically and mentally.

Again Romans 6 is helpful because Paul talks about not “presenting your members (body) to sin, but to God.”

12 Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. 13 Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. (Rom 6:11-13)

Therefore if you get this principle right there will be changes in your thinking, behavior, and attitudes. Christianity is supposed to affect how you live.

**Third, it is intentional atrophy of the flesh.** This is particular Greek word (nekroō) is used to describe things that are as good as dead, like Abraham in Romans 4:18 in reference to his ability to conceive a child in light of his old age.<sup>4</sup> The word and its usage carries the idea that something while totally alive had a functional deadness to it.

In my research on the background of this word nekroō, I ran into the English word atrophy. And that fit beautifully. According to Kittel's Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, the word translated here as put to death was used by physicians to “denote the atrophy of a part of the body through sickness.”<sup>5</sup>

I was ecstatic when I saw that word because it really helped me understand what put to death really looks like. Let me explain. Atrophy means that something grows weaker and weaker over time by disuse. In the case of a muscle, if atrophy sets in the arm becomes useless, non-function or good as dead. Your arm is still there, but it is no longer functional.

In the same way, the flesh principle or the sin principle remains within the believer (“what is earthly in you”). Its power has been conquered, but sin still remains. It is a dormant and defeated foe who can still create enormous problems. So to put that part of my life to death

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<sup>4</sup> See also Hebrews 8:12.

<sup>5</sup> Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Frierich, ed. Theological Dictionary of the New Testament: νεκροω. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989.

doesn't mean that I once and for all kill it – that's too definitive. Rather, (and here is where my heart just jumped for joy) I engage in intentional atrophy. Through the power of Christ and the Holy Spirit, I choose to not act upon my fleshly desires and in so doing they grow weaker and weaker. So one of the keys to victory over the flesh is to find a thousand creative ways to not activate the flesh.

What happens when you exercise a muscle? Its gets stronger! The more you use it, the stronger it becomes – the more weight you can lift. While that might be a good thing for your body, exercising and strengthening the flesh is dangerous. Therefore, the key is to create intentional atrophy.

Avoidance, prevention, disuse, or fleeing! Those are the strategies that the Bible often gives us for battling the flesh.

22 So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart. 23 Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels. 2 Tim 2:22-23

8 Keep your way far from her, and do not go near the door of her house (Prov 5:8-9)

25 Let not your heart turn aside to her ways; do not stray into her paths (Prov 7:25)

The Bible calls us to aggressive avoidance when it comes to the exercise of the flesh; we are called to intentional atrophy, a life of purposeful neglect of the desires of the flesh. It all starts with understanding your position, and that you have been released from the power of sin. But it continues with a passionate commitment to starve the flesh.

College Park, I want to call you today to embrace this principle of intentional atrophy. I want you to look at your life and ask yourself how much exercising you are giving to flesh? Some of you have learned the hard way that “once is never enough” when it comes to the flesh. In fact the flesh once it gets exercise desires to try to lift more sinful weight. That is why the wicked desires of our hearts pursue more and more risky behavior. An exercised flesh wants to lift more!

We've got to stop exercising the flesh! It is not who we really are. Jesus set us free and filled us with the Spirit. Let the flesh grow weak. Don't think on it, research it, or act on it. Don't justify it, try to manage it, or dip your toe in it. Don't get close to it, befriend it, or get curious about it. Avoid it. Prevent it. Neglect it. Starve it. Run from it.

And never forget that the motivation for all of this is simply that Jesus is far more attractive, desirable and satisfying than anything the flesh offers. Mortification in Colossians 3:5 involves a

transformation of the will, new attitude of the mind, and a radical shifting of the center of the personality from self to Christ.<sup>6</sup>

Exercise godliness, starve the flesh. Intentional atrophy of the flesh – that is the principle. Next we look at the nature of the battle.

### **The Battle: Insurgencies of the flesh**

It is interesting that Paul next gives us a list of sins which are characteristic of the kind of things that he wants for us to focus our intentional atrophy upon. Paul frequently uses lists like this to get intentionally invasive in our lives.<sup>7</sup>

This list is interesting though because there seems to be a progression from outward manifestation to inward craving and desires of the heart. Paul's point seems to be that we are to put this insurgency of the flesh to death **in all its forms**. In other words every person who knows Christ must be engaged in this battle and it is fought at various levels.

The list includes the following:

**Sexual immorality** – the root Greek word here is porneia, which comes from the word meaning harlot. Its original meaning was tied to prostitution, but it came to have a broader meaning of immoral sexual activity. The focus of the word seems to be upon any kind of illegitimate sexual intercourse.

**Impurity** – this word refers to moral uncleanness, and it is often linked with porneia (Gal 5:19). In the Old Testament this word (in the LXX) was used for the effect that sexual sin had upon a person's status or conscience. Therefore, it refers more to a state of life or the aura around someone. The closest that I can come to this is someone who gives you the "heebies" because they seem impure.

**Passion** – dishonorable passions it what is meant by this word. It refers to the domination of desires on the heart, mind, and will. This is a person who is out of control, and it leads to sexual excess.

**Evil desire** – lust or evil desire is the focus of this word. It is the internal longing of a person's heart. It is what you want. Desire in itself is not bad.<sup>8</sup> But it becomes bad depending on the morality of the object sought. Therefore, this is desire for the wrong things.

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<sup>6</sup> O'Brien p. 178.

<sup>7</sup> For other lists see Rom 1:29-32; 1 Cor 5:9-11; 6:9,10; Gal 5:19-23; Phil 4:8; 1 Tim 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9.

<sup>8</sup> See Phil 1:23 and 1 Thess 2:17

**Covetousness** – here is the granddaddy of them all! If you boil all of this down it is a sinful desire for more. That is covetousness: a desire for what you don't have. But that isn't all that is here. Paul says that covetousness is idolatry. What does that mean?

Covetousness is idolatry because we desire another object in way that should be reserved only for God!<sup>9</sup> Do you see the power of what Paul is saying here? The sins listed here from physical acts to desires of the heart are not little moral discretions or lapses in judgment. They are **treason!**

If Christ is the center of the universe, and if all things were made by him and for him – then setting our affection on anything at the neglect of him is idolatry. So stop exercising the flesh! At every level – from actions to desires – stop giving your sinful desires a work out. Live by dying.

### **The Motivation**

Finally, I know that there are some of you here today that you have exercised your flesh for so long that you have a hardened heart and a broken will. On the one hand, nothing really motivates you anymore, and on the other hand you have no hope.

Paul concludes this section with a warning and message of hope:

**First, the warning is very simply, “Do you not fear God?”** Verse 6 says that “on account of these the wrath of God is coming.” This is the stuff that God will judge, and these were the crimes poured out on Christ. The motivation to take this seriously springs from heart that realizes who God is. And let me tell you – one way or another God will show you the consequences of your sin.

**Second, the message of hope is that this is not who you are anymore.** Verse 7 says, “In these you too walked when you were living in them.” In other words, you are not “in them” you are “in Christ.” You've been set free. The old is gone. The new has come. Jesus liberated you from the domination of your sinful desires. You are not in them so you don't need to walk in them.

We have here two great motivations to stop exercising the flesh: fear and hope.

The principle is put sin to death. The battle is the insurgency of the flesh. The motivation is the supremacy of God. Sanctification involves a strategy of cultivating fruit and intentional atrophy of the flesh.

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<sup>9</sup> F.F. Bruce. The Epistle to the Colossians. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984. p. 144.

So if you are weary of doing the same sinful things, if you are sick and tired of wrong desires, if you are weary of a pattern of sin and you want to start fight again. Here's your strategy: On the basis of Jesus and by the Spirit **stop exercising the flesh.**

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