

## Monday - Colossians 3:1-4

There is one common thread that unites all Christians and all denominations and all churches: they all struggle with the temptation to sin and want to know how to defeat it and break free of its paralyzing grip.

The church, to a large degree, has failed in its well-meant efforts to equip Christians to wage war against the world, the flesh, and the devil. Typically today (and throughout history) the approach to getting people to do what is right is by telling them in a very loud, angry, and threatening voice, "Don't do what is wrong!" We've operated under the assumption that if we portray the horrid consequences of sin in sufficiently graphic and revolting terms we will succeed in motivating the human will to turn from it.

I'm not suggesting that sin doesn't have horrid and devastating consequences. It most certainly does, now and especially in eternity. Nor am I suggesting that we cease telling people to abstain from sin or that we tone down the urgency with which we warn them concerning its deceitful and destructive ways.

But if all we bring to bear against the incredibly powerful allure of sensual self-indulgence is a "Just Say No!" campaign, we don't stand much of a chance. Any approach to resisting temptation that consists solely (or even primarily) of a teeth-gritting, fist-clenching, will-wracking resolve not to yield will ultimately fail. Or, if it does manage to succeed in the short term it will produce a joyless and mean-spirited legalism that will hardly prove attractive either to Christians or non-Christians.

What's missing in our battle with temptation? Without intending to be simplistic, it's the failure to understand the source of sin's allure. We sin because it feels good! Sin is hard to resist because it has a remarkable capacity to please. The author of Hebrews spoke of the "passing pleasures of sin" (Heb. 11:25; the ESV renders it "the fleeting pleasures of sin"). Granted, the pleasure sin brings is passing, transient, and fleeting. But it's still a pleasure! That's why we so readily yield to it.

The bottom line is this: when faced with temptation, the immediate gratification of sin will almost always triumph over the fear of its long-term consequences.

So how do we defeat the power of sin's promise of pleasure? Answer: by faith in God's promise of a superior pleasure! Paul concluded chapter two of Colossians with an indictment of any attempt to defeat the promptings of the flesh by the imposition of ascetic, legalistic, extra-biblical regulations. If they provide only an illusion of victory over fleshly impulses, what will actually work? Is there an alternative? Yes.

Paul will do more than merely denounce what is ineffective in our battle with the flesh. His recommendation is found in Colossians 3:1-2 – "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth."

These two verses are simply another way of saying: holiness, in this case the ability to say no to "fleshly indulgence" and the passionate desire to walk in the way of Christ (2:23b), comes not primarily from rigorous asceticism or self-restraint but from a mind captivated and controlled by the beauty and majesty of the risen Lord and all that we are in him in the heavenlies!

Yielding to fleshly urges is overcome by "seeking" the things above. Fixing our minds on "things above" leaves little time or mental energy for earthly fantasies. The heart that is entranced by the risen Christ is not easily seduced by "the things that are on earth" (v. 2b). Paul uses language that requires both the energetic orientation of our will ("keep seeking") as well as the singular devotion of our mind ("set your mind"). This is a conscious and volitionally deliberate movement of the soul to fix and ground itself on, indeed to glut itself in, if you will, the beauty of spiritual realities as opposed to the trivial and tawdry things of this world.

The reason we must seek the things above is because that is "where Christ is" (v. 1). He is the exalted center and supreme sovereign of the eternal and heavenly realm. Why would we want

our lives and thoughts and actions fixed anywhere else? The appeal of heavenly things is the presence of Jesus. It is the glory and beauty and multifaceted personality and power and splendor of the risen Christ to which Paul directs our attention.

The apostle is not averse to calling us away from the earthly and transient temptations of the flesh. In fact, in Colossians 3:5-6 he grounds his appeal to abstain from immorality, impurity, and idolatry in the impending reality of divine wrath. But only after, and I believe because he has something incomparably more grand and glorious to which he has already called us, namely, Jesus and the grandeur of things above. This, I believe Paul would have us know, is of great value against fleshly indulgence!

## **Tuesday - Colossians 3:5**

When I first began reading through the Bible I looked for some unifying themes. I concluded that there are many and that if we make just one theme the theme (such as ‘covenant’ or ‘kingdom’) we run the danger of reductionism. However, one of the main ways to read the Bible is as the ages-long struggle between true faith and idolatry. In the beginning, human beings were made to worship and serve God, and to rule over all created things in God’s name (Gen 1:26 –28). Paul understands humanity’s original sin as an act of idolatry: “They exchanged the glory of the immortal God...and worshipped and served created things rather than the creator” (Rom 1:21–25). Instead of living for God, we began to live for ourselves, or our work, or for material goods. We reversed the original intended order. And when we began to worship and serve created things, paradoxically, the created things came to rule over us. Instead of being God’s vice-regents, ruling over creation, now creation masters us. We are now subject to decay and disease and disaster. The final proof of this is death itself. We live for our own glory by toiling in the dust, but eventually we return to the dust—the dust “wins” (Gen 3:17–19). We live to make a name for ourselves but our names are forgotten. Here in the beginning of the Bible we learn that idolatry means slavery and death.

The Ten Commandments' first two and most basic laws (one-fifth of all God's law to humankind) are against idolatry. Exodus does not envision any third option between true faith and idolatry. We will either worship the uncreated God or we will worship some created thing (an idol). There is no possibility of our worshipping nothing. The classic New Testament text is Romans 1:18-25. This extensive passage on idolatry is often seen as only referring to the pagan Gentiles, but instead we should recognize it as an analysis of what sin is and how it works. Verse 21 tells us that the reason we turn to idols is because we want to control our lives, though we know that we owe God everything. “Though they knew God, they neither glorified God nor gave thanks to him.” Verse 25 tells us the strategy for control—taking created things and setting our hearts on them and building our lives around them. Since we need to worship something, because of how we are created, we cannot

eliminate God without creating God-substitutes. Verses 21 and 25 tell us the two results of idolatry:

- 1) Deception—"their thinking became futile and their hearts were darkened,"and
- 2) Slavery—"they worshipped and served" created things.

Whatever we worship we will serve, for worship and service are always inextricably bound together. We are "covenantal" beings. We enter into covenant service with whatever most captures our imagination and heart. It ensnares us. So every human personality, community, thought-form, and culture will be based on some ultimate concern or some ultimate allegiance—either to God or to some God-substitute. Individually, we will ultimately look either to God or to success, romance, family, status, popularity, beauty or something else to make us feel personally significant and secure, and to guide our choices. Culturally we will ultimately look to either God or to the free market, the state, the elites, the will of the people, science and technology, military might, human reason, racial pride, or something else to make us corporately significant and secure, and to guide our choices.

No one grasped this better than Martin Luther, who ties the Old Testament and New Testament together remarkably in his exposition of the Ten Commandments. Luther saw how the Old Testament law against idols and the New Testament emphasis on justification by faith alone are essentially the same. He said that the Ten Commandments begin with two commandments against idolatry. It is because the fundamental problem in law-breaking is always idolatry. In other words, we never break the other commandments without first breaking the law against idolatry. Luther understood that the first commandment is really all about justification by faith, and to fail to believe in justification by faith is idolatry, which is the root of all that displeases God.

All those who do not at all times trust God and do not in all their works or sufferings, life and death, trust in His favor, grace and good-will, but seek His favor in other things or in themselves, do not keep this [First] Commandment, and practice real idolatry, even if they were to do the works of all the other Commandments,

and in addition had all the prayers, obedience, patience, and chastity of all the saints combined. For the chief work is not present, without which all the others are nothing but mere sham, show and pretense, with nothing back of them... If we doubt or do not believe that God is gracious to us and is pleased with us, or if we presumptuously expect to please Him only through and after our works, then it is all pure deception, outwardly honoring God, but inwardly setting up self as a false [savior]... (Part X. XI) Excerpts from Martin Luther, Treatise Concerning Good Works (1520).

Here Luther says that failure to believe that God accepts us fully in Christ—and to look to something else for our salvation—is a failure to keep the first commandment; namely, having no other gods before him. To try to earn your own salvation through works-righteousness is breaking the first commandment. Then he says that we cannot truly keep any of the other laws unless we keep the first law—against idolatry and works-righteousness. Thus beneath any particular sin is this sin of rejecting Christ-salvation and indulging in self-salvation.

For example, let's say a person cheats on his income tax form. Why does he do that? Well, you say, because he is a sinner. Yes, but why does his sin take this form? Luther's answer would be that the man only cheated because he was making money and possessions—and the status or comfort from having more of them—more important than God and his favor. Or let's say a person lies to a friend rather than lose face over something she has done. In that case the underlying sin is making human approval or your reputation more important than the righteousness you have in Christ.

The Bible, then, does not consider idolatry to be one sin among many (and a rare sin found only among primitive people). Rather, all our failures to trust God wholly or to live rightly are at root idolatry—something we make more important than God. There is always a reason for a sin. Under our sins are idolatrous desires.

### **Wednesday - Colossians 3:6**

Among the many distortions of biblical truth in our world today, few are more egregious than that of Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker in their horribly mis-titled and misleading book, "Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament & Contemporary Contexts" (IVP, 2000). The focus of the book is their repudiation of Christ's death on the cross as a penal substitutionary sacrifice. My primary concern in this lesson, however, is less with their view of the atonement (which is barely existent in the book) and more their denial of divine wrath that would warrant Christ's death as a propitiatory offering (see Romans 3:25; 1 John 2:1-2).

I'm reluctant even to quote from the book, given the distorted and prejudicial language used to describe the wrath of God. But here are a few statements that should give you a sense of what they have in mind.

"Paul's portrait of God is not that of an angry deity requiring mollification. Divine wrath is not an affective quality or 'feeling' on the part of God. Rather, it is a means of underscoring how seriously God takes sin. . . . Whatever else can be made of Paul's understanding of the death of Jesus, his theology of the cross lacks any developed sense of divine retribution" (56).

They ridicule penal substitution as advocating the idea that Christ was punished "by execution on the cross so as to satisfy the rancor of God" (63). Penal substitution, they contend, is based in large measure on "the perceived necessity of placating an emotion-laden God ever on the verge of striking out against any who disobey his every will" (53). They portray the traditional view of divine wrath as God lashing out "in frustration or vengeance" against sinners (55).

Divine wrath, say Green and Baker, is not a divine property or essential attribute of God. Indeed, the "wrath to come" (1 Thess. 1:9-10; Col. 3:6) simply "refers to the climactic, end-time scene of judgment when those who prefer to worship idols rather than the living God receive the fruits of their own misplaced hopes and commitments" (54). If you are thinking carefully you will want to

ask of them: Whose "judgment"? Indeed, "why" judgment? Receive from "whom"? What "fruits"?

There's really nothing new in what Green and Baker say, other than they claim to say it as evangelical Christians (which is why it so egregious; were they theological liberals, one might expect such a perspective). New Testament scholar C. H. Dodd is well known for having argued that the concept of wrath is archaic and beneath the dignity of God. Paul's terminology, said Dodd, refers to no more than "an inevitable process of cause and effect in a moral universe." In other words, divine wrath is an impersonal force operative in a moral universe, not a personal attribute or disposition in the character of God.

This runs directly counter to the way in which the two Greek words for wrath ("thumos" and "orge") are used in the New Testament. The former is said to be "of God" in Romans 2:8 and six times in the book of Revelation (14:10,19; 15:1,7; 16:1; 19:15). Here in Colossians 3:6, however, and in most other cases, the word "orge" is used and suggests the idea of a settled disposition arising out of God's nature. It is specifically said to be "of God" in John 3:36 (on the lips of Jesus), as well as Rom. 1:18; Eph. 5:6; Col. 3:6; Rev. 19:15. We read of the "wrath of the Lamb" in Rev. 6:16 (see also Rev. 6:17; 11:18; 14:10; 16:19). In Rev. 19:15 John speaks of "the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty," where "fury" is a translation of "thumos" and "wrath" is a translation of "orge."

Clearly, then, Dodd, Green, and Baker misunderstand divine wrath. It is not the loss of self-control or the irrational and capricious outburst of anger. Neither should it be conceived as a celestial bad temper or God lashing out at those who "rub him the wrong way." Divine wrath is righteous antagonism toward all that is unholy. It is the revulsion of God's character to that which is a violation of God's will. Indeed, one may speak of divine wrath as a function of divine love! For God's wrath is his love for holiness and truth and justice. It is because God passionately loves purity and peace and perfection that he reacts angrily toward anything and anyone who defiles them.

J. I. Packer put it best by asking, “Would a God who took as much pleasure in evil as He did in good be a good God? Would a God who did not react adversely to evil in His world be morally perfect? Surely not. But it is precisely this adverse reaction to evil, which is a necessary part of moral perfection, that the Bible has in view when it speaks of God’s wrath” (“Knowing God,” 136-37).

Leon Morris, in his remarkable book, “The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross,” agrees:

"Then, too, unless we give a real content to the wrath of God, unless we hold that men really deserve to have God visit upon them the painful consequences of their wrongdoing, we empty God's forgiveness of its meaning. For if there is no ill desert, God ought to overlook sin. We can think of forgiveness as something real only when we hold that sin has betrayed us into a situation where we deserve to have God inflict upon us the most serious consequences, and that is upon such a situation that God's grace supervenes. When the logic of the situation demands that He should take action against the sinner, and He yet takes action for him, then and then alone can we speak of grace. But there is no room for grace if there is no suggestion of dire consequences merited by sin" (185).

Why have I focused on the reality of divine wrath? Because it is on account of such things as “sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness” (Col. 3:5) that “the wrath of God is coming” (Col. 3:6; see also Eph. 5:5-6; 1 Thess. 4:3-6; 1 Cor. 6:9-10; Gal. 5:19-21).

The translation “is coming” is a bit misleading, for Paul may well have in mind a more timeless notion that wrath always “comes” on account of these things, not only in the future but throughout the course of human history. This is certainly the case in Romans 1:18ff. where Paul indicates that “the wrath of God is NOW VISIBLE in His abandonment of humanity to its chosen way of sin and all its consequences” (Moo, 96; emphasis mine). In other words, divine wrath is not simply reserved for a future day of judgment (although it will most certainly be revealed then in its consummate fury), but is actively present now as God “gives up”

men and women to their chosen course of corruption and wicked behavior (see especially Romans 1:24, 26, 28).

Cranfield is surely correct in saying that “the wrath which is being revealed is no nightmare of an indiscriminate, uncontrolled, irrational fury, but the wrath of the holy and merciful God called forth by, and directed against” men’s ungodliness (sin is an attack on God’s majesty) and unrighteousness (sin is a violation of God’s will) (111).

Divine wrath is real. It is both operative now and will come in its full and final manifestation. Thanks be to God that “there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1).

## Thursday - Colossians 3:9-10

Put to death sexual immorality. Avoid covetousness. Stop lying. Do this. Don't do that. Taboos. Prohibitions. Commandments. Rules. Enough already!

At least, that's how some feel when they read Colossians 3. The fact is, Paul does provide in quite some detail a list of proscribed activities. Later in the chapter he will insist on a display of compassion and kindness and humility and any number of other moral virtues to govern our relationships with one another, with our spouse, with our kids, with just about everyone.

So, here's the rub. What's the difference between what Paul commends in chapter three and what he condemns at the end of chapter two? You may recall that he spoke harshly of those in Colossae who insisted on strict behavior when it came to such matters as what you eat and drink, as well as your observance of certain religious festivals. The false teachers insisted on a rigorously ascetic life, always quick to say, "Don't handle that! Don't taste these! Don't touch those!" (see Col. 2:21).

What makes Paul's rules different? How is his perspective on the Christian life an improvement on theirs? He has commandments and taboos, as do they. So how does one avoid falling prey to the legalistic mentality that Paul so roundly denounced? How do we pursue holiness without reducing Christianity to simply being moral?

The answer is found in something Paul repeatedly emphasizes in chapter three that is noticeably absent from the man-made philosophy threatening the church in Colossae. Legalists, of whatever variety, typically argue "to" life. That is to say, they identify the good one must pursue and the bad one must avoid as a means to gain favor with God or as a condition on which he may be disposed to grant life.

Paul, on the other hand, together with other NT writers, argues "from" life. Holiness is portrayed as the fruit of acceptance with God, not the root. We already are the favored and beloved of God, made such by sovereign grace alone, and it is on the basis of this

glorious truth that we are inwardly impelled (rather than outwardly compelled) to express life, not earn it.

We are not encouraged to do this or avoid that in order to gain Christ. Rather, it is because we have already died with Christ (Col. 2:20) and have already been raised with Christ (Col. 3:1) that we avidly seek after holiness. We pursue purity and eschew evil not in order to be hidden with him but because we already are (Col. 3:3).

Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in Colossians 3:9-10 where Paul explicitly mentions the basis on which he issues his ethical imperatives. Look closely: "Do not lie to one another, seeing that you HAVE PUT OFF THE OLD SELF with its practices and HAVE PUT ON THE NEW SELF, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator." As was the case earlier in chapter three, so also here the ground for his exhortation is the accomplished truths of salvation. And it doesn't stop here. It is also BECAUSE we are "God's chosen ones, holy and beloved" (Col. 3:12), that we are to be compassionate and kind and humble, etc. And it is BECAUSE we have already been fully and freely forgiven by Christ that we "also must forgive" one another (Col. 3:13).

So, the reason for this choice to "put to death" and "put off" such practices is that you have already discarded the old man and his ways and have put on the new. We put off the old man in our baptism with Christ in his death and we put on the new man when we were raised with Christ in baptism to newness of life.

The contrast between "the old man" and "the new (man)" is not simply an individual one, as if the "old" referred to my personal bad behavior and the "new" to my good, Christian conduct. Yes, that is involved, but there's more. There are corporate and historical-redemptive overtones in Paul's language. Peter O'Brien explains it best: "Just as the 'old man' is what they once were 'in Adam,' the embodiment of unregenerate humanity, so the 'new man' is what they now are 'in Christ,' the embodiment of the new humanity" (190-91). In other words, "the renewal refers not simply to an individual change of character but also to a corporate recreation of humanity in the Creator's image. Christ is the 'new

man' whom the Colossians have put on. He is the second Adam, the head of a new creation" (191).

Interestingly, Paul has a different, but entirely compatible emphasis in the parallel passage in Ephesians. There he commands the believer "to put off your old self" and "to put on the new self" (Ephesians 4:22,24). Thus, whereas in Col. 3:9 and Rom. 6:6 the break with the old is portrayed as having already occurred in the past, most likely at the moment of conversion, in Ephesians Paul calls on his readers "to continue to live out its significance by giving up on that old person that they no longer are. They are new people who must become in practice what God has already made them, and that involves the resolve to put off the old way of life as it attempts to impinge" (Lincoln, 285-86). Here again we see the tension between the "already" and the "not yet" in Paul's theology. We have "already" put off the old man but we have "not yet" grown into a life of consistency with that new identity.

The bottom line, then, is this: There is a world of difference, indeed it is the difference between heaven and hell (!), between working "to" or "for" life as if to put God in your debt, and working "from" and "because of" a life that God has already graciously and mercifully bestowed.

### **Friday - Colossians 2:16-23**

Some Christians are really good at compartmentalizing their faith. By that I mean they pick and choose when and where and in what ways their Christian values and beliefs are expressed. There are certain "sacred" arenas, so to speak, in which being a Christian is for them the "thing to do". But there are also "secular" venues in which they check their Christianity at the door and live almost as if they know nothing of Jesus Christ.

Paul won't have it! As far as he's concerned, there is no such thing as "secular" space. There is no event, activity, endeavor, or goal that is exempt from the Lordship of Jesus. There is no idea, aspiration, dream, or belief that does not come under his sovereign sway. There is no achievement, accomplishment, work, or word that does not exist for the glory of the Son of God.

If you doubt this, consider the comprehensive, all-encompassing, universal scope of Paul's language in Colossians 3:17. He writes: "And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Col. 3:17). He said virtually the same thing in 1 Corinthians 10:31 – "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."

Note carefully the language he employs: "word or deed" (Col. 3:17), "eat or drink" (1 Cor. 10:31). These are what we call "spectrum" terms, which is to say, they are designed to be all-inclusive of every conceivable option. They cover the spectrum. One cannot say in response to Colossians 3:17, "Well, there are some things in my life that are technically neither 'words' that I speak nor 'deeds' that I perform." By "word or deed" Paul is spanning the spectrum of all possible activities, whether they be physical, mental, spiritual, vocal, or whatever.

Likewise, one cannot say in response to 1 Corinthians 10:31, "Well, I'm happy to 'eat' and 'drink' to the glory of God, always diligent to give thanks for the sustenance he provides, but my sex life and my career and my hobbies are something else altogether." No! By "eating" and "drinking" Paul means all human endeavors, all human experiences, no exceptions allowed.

Some folk don't like that. They want to hold back something for themselves. They want to lay hold of money or power or certain pursuits that they conceive as outside the dominion and lordship of Jesus, something over which they exercise independent and autonomous authority.

But again, Paul won't have it. Don't try to evade the force of this passage by saying it only applies to the subject of worship in the preceding verse (Col. 3:16). Yes, of course all the "words" and "deeds" that are utilized in the singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs are done "in the name of the Lord Jesus." But Paul refuses to compartmentalize Christian discipleship by restricting the lordship of Jesus to something so obviously "spiritual" in nature. Note again: "whatever" you do, do "all" in the name of Jesus. There are no exceptions. End of argument.

The phrase "in the name of the Lord Jesus" is found frequently in the NT. It is "in the name of the Lord Jesus" that we are baptized in water (Acts 10:48). Salvation itself is available only in that name (Acts 4:12). It is in his name that forgiveness of sins is found (Acts 10:43; 1 John 2:12), as well as eternal life (1 John 5:13), the presence of the Holy Spirit (John 14:26), dominion over demons (Luke 10:17), and miraculous healing (Acts 3:6,16), and the list could go on and on. "In the name of the Lord Jesus" thus means "for the sake of the Lord Jesus" or "in open and explicit acknowledgement that he alone is Lord and Sovereign over all" or "to the glory of the Lord Jesus" or "in humble admission that he is the source of all good things" or "because of who Jesus is and all that he has accomplished in his life, death, and resurrection."

So, what would your life look like if it were actually the case that literally everything you did or said or thought or even dreamed was "in the name of the Lord Jesus"? Let's take our speech, as one example. How often, before we speak, do we think: "What I am about to utter should reflect the fact that I'm a Christian, that Christ died for me, that he is worthy of glory and honor"? How might that affect what we actually end up saying?

How often, before we act, do we think: "What I am about to do ought to conform perfectly with what Jesus did and should make clear to everyone who watches that I am his and he is mine"?

The great Dutch statesman and theologian, Abraham Kuyper, once said (in paraphrase): "There is not one square inch in all the universe over which Jesus Christ does not say: 'Mine!'" Well, that includes the thoughts in our heads, the words on our lips, the steps we take, the books we read, the things on television we watch, the food we eat, the music we hear. It is all to be placed in submission to him and made subservient to his glory.

In conclusion, and on a practical note, consider for a moment all the many decisions we face in life for which the Bible does not provide explicit guidance. I have in mind those so-called "grey" areas in which the scales of balance appear to be evenly weighted. How are we to proceed when a choice is unavoidable? Perhaps we should apply the principle of this passage and ask the question: "Can it be done in the name and for the glory of Christ? Is this a decision that will encourage and facilitate thanksgiving to God? Will it honor the savior? What choice or direction will most readily display Christ as the treasure of my life and as the glorious and beautiful God that he is?"

Do you compartmentalize the Lordship of Jesus, confining him to activities typically discharged on Sunday? Or is your view of his authority and dominion as utterly comprehensive and all-consuming as Paul envisions in this passage? May we joyfully consecrate all to him, in his name, and for his sake.