



LIVING CHRISTIANLY – TAKING OFF THE OLD

Colossians 3:5-11

March 1, 2009

Dr. Todd Wilson, Senior Pastor

INTRODUCTION: WHERE TO BEGIN LIVING CHRISTIANLY

The Bible is a practical book. In saying this, I don't mean primarily that the Bible has lots of "practical" advice about a lot of practical things (though that's certainly true). No, I mean practical in a more technical sense: the Bible *aims* at practice. The Bible's purpose is to transform our lives into the image and likeness of Christ's.

So as we turn our attention to 3:5-11 and the topic of Living Christianly, we get to the heart of what the Bible is all about – helping us live Christianly, helping us to live in a way that honors Christ in all that we say and do.

However, in order to rightly situate this passage (3:5-11) in the context of the letter, let me begin with two simple observations.

First, *Colossians doesn't begin with this passage*. Did you notice that the letter doesn't begin with Paul first introducing himself, greeting those to whom he's writing, and then launching off into the content of what we find in 3:5 and following: "I, Paul, am writing to you, Colossians. Greetings. Now put to death whatever belongs to your earthly nature."

Colossians doesn't begin like this. And here's why: because Christianity doesn't begin like this. Christianity's first word to you is not: "Greetings! Good to see you. Now, get your act together." In other words, Christianity doesn't begin with living Christianly; Christianity doesn't begin human response. Rather, Christianity begins with divine initiative; Christianity begins with divine realities.

The second observation is this: *Colossians doesn't skip this passage*. It doesn't move from a call to "set our minds on things above" (3:2) to the closing benediction and blessing, as though the Christian life were sufficiently captured by that call alone.

Hence, the "therefore" at the beginning of 3:5 is critical. It underscores the "gospel logic" of this passage: namely, that living Christianly is built upon gospel realities, and that gospel realities must issue in living Christianly. We see this same "gospel logic" in that well-known verse from Romans: "Therefore, in view of the mercies of God, brother, offer your bodies as a living sacrifice." This is precisely what Paul is saying in this passage: in view of the mercies of God as I have described them in 3:1-4, offer your bodies as a living sacrifice to the Lord.

Now, in this paragraph, Paul calls for us to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice in two ways in particular. That is, he calls us to put off the old man, our old pattern of life, in two ways: the first is in terms of old patterns of sexuality, and the second is in terms of old patterns of speech. We will look at each of these in turn.

KILL SELF-SERVING SEXUALITY (3:5-7)

What is self-serving sexuality?

As we said, then, in this passage there are two basic responses, or two first-steps, to living Christianly. The first is this: *kill self-serving sexuality*. That's what Paul's calling for here in 3:5: "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry."

Self-serving sexuality is, I believe, what Paul has in mind here with this list of what might otherwise appear to be a randomly chosen list of vices. In fact, you see a progression backward or downward, you might say, from the act to the attitude to the idol.

Self-serving sexuality is sexuality with greed at its heart. Sexuality is a most beautiful thing. But sexuality becomes a most ugly and abusive thing when greed worms its way into the heart of sexuality. Then it corrupts the whole thing and turns it into a ugly and exploitive thing altogether.

All around us we see the signs of self-serving sexuality on display. From the gross expression of it in the pornography industry or the sex-trade to the subtle but no less exploitative use of the female body to sell everything from blue jeans to bubblegum. We see self-serving sexuality at work in the sordid conversations around the college dorm room or the high school cafeteria lunch table. We even see it within the context and confines of marriage, as sexuality is used, not to serve the other, but to serve the self.

Why should we kill self-serving sexuality?

This passage doesn't just call us to kill self-serving sexuality, but provides some incentive for doing so; in fact, two incentives. The first incentive to kill self-serving sexuality sounds blunt (indeed, painfully blunt for our modern ears). For it amounts to this: *kill self-serving sexuality or it will kill you*. This is in essence what Paul says in 3:6. Why should we kill self-serving sexuality or put to death whatever belongs to our earthly nature? Answer: because of the *very real threat* of the wrath of God. Or, as Paul tells the Colossians, "Because of these, the wrath of God is coming" (3:6).

There's another aspect to this incentive to kill self-serving sexuality in 3:7, where Paul reminds the Colossians of where they've been: "You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived." In saying this, it is as if Paul is calling them to remember how life-sucking this former way of life was. "You used to live this way, and you therefore know it doesn't give life, but takes it!"

How do we kill self-serving sexuality?

But how do we kill self-serving sexuality? Paul doesn't exactly explain the "how" in this passage. Perhaps, though, we have a clue in language of "put to death" (3:5). This is obviously violent language. We're being called on to kill: to execute, to murder, to crucify.

But how do you kill something? If you want to kill something, you can do it two ways: either swiftly or slowly. You can kill something swiftly by severing one of its vitals. For example, cut off its head. Or you can kill something slowly by starving it.

Severing or starving: neither approach is particularly pretty, but both approaches get the job done.

We need to use both approaches when putting to death that which belongs to our earthly nature. What is it that stirs up self-serving sexual impulses within you? And then decide: should I simply sever this off or starve it to death? Perhaps what evokes self-serving sexuality in you are images from television or the internet. Then you need to decide whether to take the swift or slow approach to execution: the swift approach would be to cancel your television or internet access – cut it off. The slow approach would be to quit feeding your earthly nature with sensual imagery and thus starve it over time.

These are our two methods for executing something. But let me make two other comments. First, the slow method is less drastic but more risky. The great thing about the swift method is just that: it's done and over. Secondly, because we're talking about killing something in us, don't be surprised if it's messy and hurts.

CHUCK OTHERS-HURTING SPEECH (3:8-11)

What is others-hurting speech?

So the first step in Christian living is killing self-serving sexuality. The second response this passage calls for is this: *chuck others-hurting speech*. Paul doesn't put in quite these terms. He says this: "But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other" (3:8-9a).

Others-hurting speech – that's the theme of these various vices listed in 3:8-9: "anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips," together with 3:9, "Do not lie to each other." Others-hurting I get from the first three attitudes mentioned in 3:8: "anger, rage, malice." These are obviously attitudes, sinful attitudes, directed toward other people. When someone wrongs you or someone you love, the response is, first, anger, then rage, then malice, that is, evil-intent or intention to do harm.

But, as we all recognize, in the vast, vast majority of the cases where do anger, rage and malice go? Do they turn into violent acts of assault on other people? No. Why? Because we don't want to suffer the consequences that would result if we gave full vent to our anger, rage and malice.

So, instead, what do we do with our anger, rage and malice, so that we can get it out without getting ourselves in trouble? Answer: we try to hurt people with our speech, with our words. We engage in others-hurting speech. So, we do a couple of things. We might, first of all, engage in a little "slander," speaking ill of someone. Or we might let "filthy language [come] from our lips," in order to intimidate or bully or threaten someone. Thirdly, we might do what has always worked for the devil: we might just simply "lie" (3:9).

And, like with self-serving sexuality, we see the signs of others-hurting speech all around us: from the morning commute, to late night talk shows; from the basketball court when we're at play, to the conversation around the water-cooler when we're at work. We also, regrettably, see others-hurting speech in the life of the Christian church, don't we?

Why should we get rid of others-hurting speech?

Yet others-hurting speech is so out of place in the life of the church. And here's why, as Paul points out in 3:9-11: *because we are together being transformed into one new person*. "Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices, and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in the knowledge in the image of its Creator. Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all."

Notice how Paul ends this passage: on a note of inclusivity in verse 11, where he explains that within the life of the church (the "here" to which he points, the corporate entity, the new corporate self, the body of Christ) all these age-old divisions are finally overcome. That's why I introduce others-hurting speech into this context, the body of the church, is not only so out of place, but so damaging, as well. For nothing more quickly undermines the integrity of this one new community than divisive and hurtful speech. Or, as Paul puts it so succinctly in Ephesians: "Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one another" (4:25).

How do we get rid of others-hurting speech?

But how do we make strides in getting rid of speech that hurts others? Here let me offer two simple suggestions. First, *consider the damage*. Oftentimes I think we can engage in conversation and say things that are slanderous or malicious toward others because we simply are naïve about the damage this kind of thing does. "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but *words* can never hurt me." Well, not really. Words can set the world on fire, as James reminds us: "Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body" (4:6).

The second tack to take when trying to get rid of others-hurting speech is to focus less on the alligators that come out of your mouth and instead on the swamp where those alligators live: your heart. For you remember how Jesus put it: "For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matt. 12:34). So if you want to kill the alligators of ugly speech, first drain the swamp of anger, rage and malice. Recognize who you're tempted to slander or badmouth, realize that you are to forgive them whatever grievance you have, and then resolve to release the bitterness and frustration. And, when you do that, you'll find the anger and rage and malice begin to dry up and the alligators become less frequent.

CONCLUSION

So what we have here in this passage are the first steps to living Christianly. This passage is calling us to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God. In particular, it is calling us to offer up our sexuality and our speech, these two most pervasive and concrete aspects of our existence.

However, we must remember that this call is built upon what Paul calls in Romans 12:1 the "mercies of God." Or, in this passage, it is a call to live in light of our new life in Christ: "For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God."